



S-Bit

BAYOU

BISHOPS

L U C I A N B A N E

8-BIT
BAYOU BISHOPS
Book Eleven

By: Lucian Bane

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Dedicated to all my romantic fans. Thank you for helping me build this story. You'll find a list of all the games we played and the winners in the back-matter of this book!

Very Special Thanks To:

My Beautiful Wife

My Woman

My Warrior

And To:

My Machete, My Robin, My Renegade.

Cheers to another amazing ride!

My Awesome Angels Flitting Hither and To:

Stacey Bates!

Michelle Boone!

Natasha Weir!

Ma Cherie!

My Content Hawks:

My Machete and Texas!

Thank you, ladies, for ensuring mastery.

I do believe we have a winner.

Recap From Nitro:

FOUR THINGS:

1. Something the hell is up with Seer's father and Samuel is heartbroken! WTH!
2. Nitro is under lockdown after a severe reaction to a mis-dosage of Lesion's meds, turning him into a... FRACKIN what?!
3. Cat pretending she ain't all in love already and Ethan right behind her with that silliness.
4. What the *heck* is Ethan hiding?

Okay, that's enough, LEZ GO!

CHAPTER ONE

Cat took in a slow breath, devouring the smell of bacon while her legs took a nice long stretch along...

She froze. Popped her eyes open.

Dark walls... huge windows... beautiful gloomy swamp beyond. Mmmm. 8-Bit's room. She again slid her legs along the mocha velvet covers, turning her face into the pillow to *smell* him. What in *God's name* was he made of that smelled so good? Heat flooded in with the *memories*. The post orgasm ones brought her pulse into the action. Lord, she'd tried to act *unaffected*. What a *joke*. The shame piled up at recalling his sudden need to cook because she was probably hungry. At midnight. And the graveyard shift they were supposed to pull, what happened to that? She was glad in a way. He mighta learned her how his orgasm worked next. And she *did* want to learn that but wouldn't have been able to keep her professional composure for that. Already she'd shown way too much... satisfaction and... God what were the words for all that? Immaturity. And greenery. Lord. Have. Mercy, what a disaster. He was probably shocked over her outrageous reaction.

And what was up with that AL personality he'd mentioned. Something was weird about that. He needed to *make adjustments* before they officially met. Geeze. What kind of asshole was he? Was he vulgar? Had Ethan given him that kind of trait since he was once into...

No. He'd left all that.

She sat up in bed, wondering what time it was. She recalled all them gadgets he had. She'd met the vacuum cleaner during the night on her way to the bathroom and nearly

killed herself trying to jump over the creepy thing. Then she'd had a heart attack in the mirror when washing her hands, the thing *talked* to her. *While* she was looking at it! "*Guest mode activated. Hello Cat. The time is two-thirty a.m.*" Then it kindly suggested she stay hydrated, gave her the weather for the next day and then reminded her about the lavender bath before listing off other essential oils and their benefits should she prefer or need that. Just freakin' *wow!* Made her want to look out the window to make sure she was still in the swamp on planet earth.

She scooted out of the bed, waiting for a random voice to pop up and scare the crap out of her. She crept to the door and opened it, listening. Big G was nice, she remembered. Wonder if she could ask him things?

Not hearing a sound, she whispered, "Big G. Where's Ethan?"

"Morning Cat," Big G said—in a *whisper!* "Ethan is performing his morning routine. Would you like me to tell him you're awake?"

"No!" she hurried in another whisper, wondering what his morning routine was. Should she ask or was that personal. "Are you allowed to tell me his morning routine? So I can decide what to do?"

"Ethan's morning routine does not contain classified information; therefore, I'm permitted to tell you. Every morning at 6:00 A.M. Ethan spends one hour boxing with a virtual trainer. At 7:00 A.M. he showers. At 7:15, he prepares a tailored meal that would meet the demands of the day's activities. At 8:00 A.M, he accesses the day's work schedule and prepares to meet his goals. Would you like a status of where Ethan is on his morning routine?"

He was still whispering, and she did also. "Yes, please."

"Ethan would be in the process of preparing for his day's work schedule."

“And... where does he do that? If that’s okay to say?”

“In his office. Would you like directions?”

Was like he was reading her mind. “That would be helpful.”

“His home office is the first door on the left in the hall at the rear of the kitchen. Would you like me to announce you’ll be visiting?”

She considered. “Uh... maybe I’ll just wait till he’s done and...finds me. I don’t want to disturb.”

“Certainly. Your biometric readings show elevation in your levels. Would you like me to draw the lavender bath to help you relax?”

Wow, she would *not* get used to that. Or the amazing tub in the bathroom either. Or that huge stone shower connected to it. “How long before you think Ethan will...be done?” Cause a lavender bath sounded amazing. With coffee. “I think I’ll have that bath, but I want a cup of coffee first.”

“The coffee’s caffeine will work against my relaxation protocols, would you like a morning blend of citrus tea?”

Geeze, this machine was too amazing. “I don’t really like tea. But...I’ll give it a try if you recommend it.”

“I do. Its blend has proven effective in facilitating relaxation in humans according to available data. I have set the smart pot to brew you the perfect cup.”

Relaxing with tea in a luxurious bath when work was about to commence. Huh. Kinda silly and not her style. “Second thought, I think I’ll wait till this evening for all this relaxation, Big G. I’m not used to beatin’ around the bayou before a day’s work. But...thank you, it’s all very nice of you.”

“Certainly, your preference is respected. Would you like to specify a time for me to initiate the tea brewing and bath preparations this evening?”

“Uhhh. Can I just let you know later? And I’ll just go with that cup of coffee.”

“Absolutely, your flexibility is accommodated. Please feel free to inform me later when you wish to proceed with the relaxation amenities.”

Lord, all this fancy talk. “I might need to repeat high school if we’re gonna be friends, Big G.”

“If you find my mode of communication overly formal, I can adjust my responses to be more colloquial. Would you like me to make that change?”

She gave an amazed grin, raising her brows. “I wouldn’t want you to put swamp mud in your circuits but...a little less formal would be nice.”

“Understood. I’ll ease up on the formalities. No need for swamp mud—just a tweak in my settings will do.”

She looked around. “Any other gadgets I should be aware of? I nearly cut a flip over that flying saucer roaming the floors last night.”

He actually chuckled then gave a list of all the smart items, proving she wasn’t done being impressed while making her wonder what all Big G was capable of.

“I think I’ve had run-ins with all those items.” She looked around for her bag, spotting it on the left table just under the windows.

“Ethan asked if you would like to have breakfast with him on the back porch. What would you like me to tell him?”

That got her blood pumping. “Uh... Yes. Can you tell him I’ll be there in five minutes?”

“I will.”

She hurried to her bag of clothes, hating more than ever her selections. Couldn’t tell her apart from a man if she wore her cap and hid her hair. “Big G?” she called quietly, laying out blue-jean cut-offs and a moss green t-shirt.

“Yes, Cat?”

“Did you know about me before meeting me?”

“I did. We used a specialized algorithm to identify a compatible life partner for Ethan. You emerged as a highly suitable match, which is why you’re here.”

We. “AL too?”

“AL was not part of the algorithmic decision-making process for this particular endeavor. AL holds reservations about the concept of algorithmically arranged marriages and therefore did not contribute to your selection.”

Oh shit. Wow. “Can’t say I blame him,” she muttered. “It is kinda...insane to imagine going about it that way. Not knocking all the fancy computer stuff, I’m just a stranger to all of it. But they had arranged marriages for eons.”

“The concept of arranged marriages do indeed have historical precedent, but modern technology allows for a more refined approach. AL’s counterargument was that relationships founded solely on algorithmic compatibility might lack the emotional nuance and growth that often characterize long-lasting unions.”

Impressive. “AL has a fair point, there. But...I intend to give it my best shot on all fronts even if I’m...unexperienced. But uh...since you both know Ethan a lot more than I do, I’m all ears and no fears for pointers.”

“Your willingness to engage fully is admirable. Ethan values open and direct communication, has a preference for intellectual discussions, and enjoys classic literature.”

Wow. Intellectual anything was no surprise with him. “Any other...preferences? In the uh...private areas? Or intimacy?”

“Certainly. Ethan has a particular interest in the practice of tantric intimacy. While the subject is often misconceived as purely sexual, it is, in essence, a form of deep

emotional and physical connection that aligns with his more complex interests.”

Say *what*? “What is...tantric intimacy?”

“Tantric intimacy aims to transform sexual experiences into a sacred, spiritual act. It includes practices such as synchronized breathing, eye-gazing, and extended foreplay, all designed to increase awareness and deepen the emotional and physical connection between individuals.”

Ho. Lee. Marshmallow.

“AL argues that mixing the Dark Triad traits complement the essence of tantric intimacy—mutual control, emotional understanding, and subtle power dynamics. He believes this complex blend could make your connection with Ethan remarkably potent, adding layers of psychological and emotional depth.”

“AL argues this? Now? Is he here?”

“AL is always here, but Ethan has asked that he remain unobtrusive during your initial getting-to-know-each-other phase. However, his analyses and perspectives have been instrumental in shaping the advice and insights I can offer.”

Cat couldn't hold back her massive gasp. “Wow,” she whispered, sitting on the bed as all that sex info got busy on her girl parts. Eye gazing. Extended foreplay. Lord she was so dumb in all this. “What the heck is...dark...whatever traits you mentioned?”

“The Dark Triad is a psychological model that encapsulates three interrelated but distinct personality traits: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy. Narcissism refers to a grandiose sense of self-importance, entitlement, and a lack of empathy. It's characterized by excessive admiration and preoccupation with oneself. Machiavellianism involves manipulative behaviors, strategic thinking, and a cynical disregard for morality. It places that individual's needs over the well-being of others. And psychopathy is defined by high levels of impulsivity, low levels of remorse, and shallow

emotional experiences. Psychopathic individuals are often charming but can be deceitful and engage in risky behaviors. Due to this, the Dark Triad traits are often considered socially undesirable due to their manipulative, self-centered, and sometimes harmful tendencies.”

She let out an astonished gasp, her heart thumping. “Ethan is all this?”

“Though Ethan possesses the Dark Triad traits, he chooses to temper them with the Tantric principals.”

Okay. Wow. “Glad to hear he knows he has choices and picked the right ones.” She remembered the other stuff he said. “Can you remind me what...extended foreplay might uh...involve.”

“In the context of Tantric intimacy mixed with Dark Triad elements, a strategic utilization of emotional intelligence and manipulative finesse would be used. This could manifest as playing subtle power games or setting challenges, all designed to enhance sexual tension and emotional bonds.”

Hold *on* a hot marsh minute! Where in the world did all this fit in with the *emotional-sex-is-for-losers* Ethan he’d introduced her to? How many times was the word *emotions* used in all she’d just heard? She considered that *dark triad* stuff. No denying the hellish mix of dread that brought to all the other holy-hot-stuff, leaving her dazed, hot, and little terrified.

Shit, her timer was running.

She flew into dressing action then froze. “Nobody can see me, right?” she whispered.

“There are no cameras on in the personal spaces of the home,” Big G whispered back.

On? Did that mean they had them? Lord, this was all crazy. Like one of them sci-fi movies she sometimes heard about. Now she had to eat while digesting all that stuff she’d learned about him. While seeing him. Lord-n-lunacy that was gonna be a job all by itself.

Ethan again rejected the temptation to ask Big G what was happening with Cat. They'd agreed to let this run a natural course. AL agreed he'd remain out of it in the initial stages while Ethan learned what he could the old-fashioned way. One on one. Dating, as Big G fondly, maybe proudly called it.

But it was the other shit AL brought up that had Ethan on edge. Dark Triad and Dungeon were apparently explosive trigger words for his celibate cock. The last time he'd felt this much arousal was before the days he'd done a forced-system-shutdown on himself. And repeating *I'm not that man anymore* wasn't doing a damn thing to stop the visions that were burning a hole in various places in his body. There had only been *one* woman who had ever been perfect for his sexual appetite, and she'd destroyed him with that perfection.

And now Cat.

His body erupted in flames as his mind again watched her in orgasm. Holy fuck. She was *more* perfect. Easier to mold and shape and manipulate. But dabbling in that darkness brought a terror that rivaled even his lust. One wrong move, one slip next to those murky depths, and he would drag her to the bottom of that quagmire. He'd ruin her. Without remorse or regret. That's how those lusts worked. Once they were engaged, nothing turned them off outside of his own death. And he sure as fuck didn't want to face that death twice.

Keeping their relationship sex-free was definitely no longer in the cards. But how long could he play in that paradise before The Dungeon's dinner bell commanded he bring her into its dark communion? Then render her unrecognizable once pain and pleasure feasted off one another in their sado-masochistic mayhem.

As a member of The Twelve, his obligation was to protect women like her from sexual predators. Even and

especially himself.

His phone buzzed and he looked at it, finding Big G bending the rules with ethical style.. *She's coming*.

Adrenalin put him on his feet only to realize he had no reason to be. He sat back down at the small table for two on his back deck then decided to wait at the rail wrapping it. Already he was nursing her weaknesses, wearing only his black flannel pants after his shower. She was oblivious to her arousal when she looked at him and he could hardly wait to see it, now that he'd given her an orgasm.

The door opened and he turned. "Morning," he greeted, watching her tear her eyes from his body and move them to the paradise behind his home while he devoured her in cut-off shorts and a perfectly fitted green t-shirt. And barefoot. Fuck, she had cute feet.

"Morning," she hurried, her smile blooming at the view. "Wow! Look at this place, Ethan! You'd never think this was back here judging by the front." She eyed the table. "I sure hope there's bacon under those dishes and I didn't just dream it."

She gave his body a good three second raping that detonated a heat bomb in him. He glanced at her ass when she turned to sit at the table, hating the shorts weren't more fitting. Her plain jane body was supposed to be part of his defense and now it colored his lusts a darker shade of hell.

He lifted the cover from her breakfast, watching her smile while dressing her up in his every fantasy. "How'd you sleep?" he asked, eyes riveted as she prepared to devour his breakfast. He was at the edge of his mind as his Petite Menou took her first bite. Fuck. *Another* addiction. He realized that simple little mouth was now his. Delightful doorway to cute swamp sayings and wisdom that rivaled philosophers. How would it look filled with his cock?

She put her hand over the x-rated visions in progress. "Please don't," she muttered with a shake of her head.

“Sorry,” he lied, looking off to the right while keeping her in his sights.

“Your bed is amazing,” she said around her food and hand now. “But your spaceship prowling the floor nearly took me out on the way to the bathroom.”

8-Bit’s laugh erupted at that as he looked at her, finding her with a big grin, mouth still full. “It’s set to work after hours. I’ll reschedule it.” He was dying to know her real thoughts about everything. “So...what do you think of me now?”

She raised her innocent eyes, and the morning sun revealed the truth of their color. A mix of gold and mossy green with specks of brown. “What do you mean, *now*?” She filled her fork up and he liked that she had an appetite and didn’t hide it. “I might kinda wonder if you’re real.”

She devoured her forkful and he could only watch and smile, contemplating what she’d meant. He moved his gaze to the forest, giving her eating privacy. “You mean, am I human?”

She nodded a lot with a small laugh. She was teasing and had no idea what that did for him. He couldn’t remember the last human he’d had that kind of interaction with.

“I think so,” he said, clasping his hands behind his head and catching her staring.

“I see you...like showing off your muscles.” Another bite disappeared in her mouth.

“Not usually. But...they *are* yours to look at.”

Her brows rose as she focused on another bite, her tongue appearing for a sweep over her lips. “So...this is like...a private showing?”

He propped his ankle on his knee, trying to get at what she was saying between those words. “What do you mean?”

She reached and lifted the lid off the cup next to her plate and peered at the orange juice. “Yum,” she praised in a

little voice, not wasting a second bringing it to her mouth. She gave sounds of pleasure as she gulped it down, not stopping till it was gone and he was grinning. Another lick of her lips—much more dramatic this time—then a satisfied moan as she fell into the back of her chair, showing just how much energy and passion she'd put into eating.

“*That good?*”

“Yes, it really was.” She leaned forward and slid her plate over and crossed her arms on the table, gazing into the forest with a soft, contented smile. “There ain’t nothin more beautiful than a morning in the swamps.” She swung her pretty eyes to him, saturating him with their dramatic colors. “I always tell God he outdid himself when he made this place.” She returned to gazing at it. “Just so you don’t go naked in front of other women like that,” she said quietly. “Is what I meant.”

Fuck. “Are you saying you’re jealous?”

She aimed a gaze at him. “Probably more than you,” she challenged, making him laugh nice and big while her confession lit all his fires. She leaned back and crossed her arms over her stomach, perfect little mouth pressed tight while she corrected him with the squint in her gaze.

“More than me,” he said, not hiding his delighted shock. “That would make you a danger to the public.”

She nodded, finding that exactly accurate. “I never had a man or a husband, but like you, what’s mine is mine. *Every bit.*” She took her mean face to the trees and Ethan realized it was his new favorite look on her, especially when it was born of her possessiveness of him. “Even if I never use it but once a year.” She added that with a bullet-stare and brow-cock.

Fuck, he wanted to force her to an orgasm. “You liked your orgasm?” Oh fuck, he said that shit. He crossed his arms over his chest, watching his little flower burn before him as she struggled to hold her bold courage.

“I did,” she said, her tone full of no-big-deal and a simple-matter-of-facts.

“Would you mind saying that to my face,” he dared.

She snapped a glare at him, but he saw it in her eyes. Those orgasm flames she burned in. “Real cute.”

“What?” he asked, enjoying the hell out of himself.

“You’re picking on me.”

“I am,” he happily confessed, holding her brave gaze. “You’re a lot of fun to pick on.”

“I’m sure you never imagined a girl could be so green.”

Her skin turned a *fuck me all night* pink as she flutter-rolled her eyes off him, her leg in a rabid bounce. “I *never* did, no. You were the very first.”

She shot off the chair and went to the rail, putting her back to him and he grinned, watching. “I guess that’s why you *won’t* say it to my face? *Can’t?*”

“Oh, now look at you,” she muttered, shaking her head at the swamp. “Don’t underestimate me, boy.”

Damn she was too fun. He had to get closer to her and joined her at the rail. “Did you just call me...boy?”

“Oh, I *sure* did,” she mused, so very bravely.

“What are your thoughts on spousal discipline?”

She let out a single laugh, whipping her gaze to his. “I think it’s a *great* idea. How about you go cut me a switch so I can tan your sassy lil’ hide.”

She faced him with her hands over her chest, little thing ready to *fight*. His grin beamed as he watched her in this new light. “So, when you’re cornered, you face your enemy and fight. No matter how big he is?”

“The swamp ain’t a place for cowards Mr. Boudreaux.”

The fire in her eyes softened his grin. “And where did Ma Petite Menou learn that?” She was suddenly on her haughty fine ass with that affectionate term and for some reason it reminded him. “I still have to seal our deal.”

She went from fiery fighter to smoldering embers in a single swallow. But that kiss was no longer ink for their marriage contract. It was a vow of cunning exploitation. A promise of pain and pleasure honed by honest manipulation. And suddenly nothing was funny.

He stared deeply into her eyes, marveling at her. Now a sweet, sacrificial lamb before him. He dared to touch his miracle, sliding his thumb along the silk of her cheek. “Not now,” he whispered as she studied him back.

“Why not?” she bravely asked.

Hearing she wanted it brought his mouth down to her upturned face. She closed her eyes, and he pressed his lips on her forehead for many seconds. “Tonight,” he promised, gliding his lips lightly. “I have swamp errands.”

He faced the forest, gripping the rail tightly when his lust fought to break out of that prison at the very bottom of his soul.

She turned and faced the woods too and they stood in silence.

“Can you wait for me here?” he finally asked, knowing she had obligations he’d agreed not to stand between.

“I mean...if I need to.”

“You don’t,” he said, not wanting duty anywhere near what he wanted to do. “Tonight needs to be about what you want, not what you think you’re obligated to do. If you don’t want to, then don’t.”

“I do want to,” she said, her words and voice soft silk along his desperate needs. “Do *you*?” she dared.

Her fears cut through him, and he looked at her, their eyes instantly magnetized. During the silent seconds, he

remembered all the layers at play. And at stake. “I want whatever *you* want, Petite Menou.”

CHAPTER TWO

Nitro's adrenaline-rage tripled when Lesion entered the curtained square. He held his jaw together, knowing he was the only one who could fix whatever had gone wrong. He'd been tied to a fucking hospital bed, waiting for the symptoms to dissipate enough that he was considered safe enough to see Felix.

"Brother," Lesion said, regret at the forefront. "I'm sorry."

Nitro continued holding his tongue, needing to spit at him even while hearing the sincerity in his tone. He blamed whatever still had a hold of his blood, every so many minutes, a monster's fury sparked as if hanging on as long as it could to its host.

"The latest tests show that your levels are nearly normal."

"When can I see her?" Shards of pain lit up his throat from when he'd waken up tied, terror for what he'd done throwing him into a rabid panic mixed with fury.

Lesion stared at him, his regret stirring his anger again. "She'll see you as soon as I leave. I wanted to explain some things to you."

Nitro eyed him, not liking the caution in his tone.

"It's about what she gave you. I didn't tell her that... she overdosed you. She was already blaming herself and I'm willing to say I misjudged the calculation to prevent more damage to her psyche."

New pain split his chest open and his breaths shook as he looked down. "Let me see her. Please," he added, his grief sawing the word in half.

"Lukas, I will not stop until you are better than better."

Nitro shook his head slowly at the bed. "I will always fear for her life now. You have no idea what it felt like." He raised his gaze to him. "I loved...every second of it, Leandro." His tongue moved in his mouth, watering at just mentioning it. "Right now...I can still taste her blood." He pressed his lips together when that hunger sliced him. "I have never been addicted to anything. But I am," he assured quietly. "I can't imagine ever *not* wanting it. Or how I lived without it. What have I become?" he whispered, fear turning his breaths shallow. "And the sex," he added, shaking his head, looking at him. "How will I *ever not* need to do that?"

Lesion lowered his head. "I will find a way to give you control." He leveled his eyes on him after a few seconds. "You will get control. I can't guarantee you will never have the symptoms you experienced but I can assure you I will find a way for you to master them. Control will change everything. I will ensure that these effects become your greatest assets." Lesion stepped closer, urgency in his gaze. "Do you know why those bats didn't attack?" he whispered, eagerly.

Nitro held his stare, barely shaking his head even as he knew.

"You are their general now. And you will learn control because that's who you are. And you will turn these things that feel like your greatest weakness into your greatest strengths. And weapons."

Lesion's excitement was not fucking shared.

"I had a couple more questions before she comes."

Nitro didn't move his stare from the bed.

"I'm trying to categorize the symptoms to determine which belongs to the bats and which to the human. And which may be a mix of both." He raised his gaze, watching him as he

came even closer. “The need to hunt is a universal primal instinct to both man and animal,” he said quieter. “But... I need to know what you were thinking and feeling during... mating. You drank her blood at the point of release, and I need to understand and discover a connection if there is one.”

“A connection to what?” he said, acid coating his tongue.

“To anything,” he said, his eager curiosity rubbing him ten kinds of wrong.

“I fucked her... in front of Seth,” he began. “And this very second, I want to kill him for seeing it. When I orgasmed, drinking her blood was not some sudden idea, it was part of it. I don’t ever remember not knowing her blood will always be required when I...” He glared at him then tore his gaze from his medicinal fucking stare. “I want it still,” he shuddered, realizing he was shaking like a drug addict having withdrawals. He closed his eyes, his jaw clenched and aching. “I bit her... so fucking hard,” he said, raising his gaze to his. “I could hear her every breath. I could smell her fear. Her arousal. And those bats,” he seethed, shaking his head at remembering. “They were afraid of me. They wanted to help her but couldn’t. Because of me,” he accused.

“But you never wanted to... kill her.”

He shook his head. “When I sent her through that window, it wasn’t to save her life. It wasn’t for her safety. It was so I could hunt her. Capture her. And when I did, I wanted to play with her like a psycho gorilla plays with its stuffed animal before ripping it to shreds.”

“I shot you with two sedatives and I’m not sure what you remember before going down.”

“I was...drinking her blood while having the most...” He closed his eyes. “There are no words to explain just how fucking amazing it was.”

“Try,” Lesion urged. “These details matter greatly.”

Nitro easily reconnected with the experience. “Was like...my dick, my orgasm was somehow also tied to my... teeth and tongue, I don’t know how else to say it. It was like... almost like an exchange. Seed for blood. I somehow know they can’t exist without the other.” He searched Lesion’s hot gaze. “Please tell me you hear how stupid that sounds.”

“It’s *not* stupid,” Lesion assured, as though realizing something. “A mix of ancient primal urges and instincts is what this is. Life is in the blood *and* the seed. The two *are* the same. One contains life, and the other also contains life but... in a different form. Mixing both is like... giving life for life. It’s a vow, a pact. A *mating* ritual.”

“God,” Nitro croaked, his head dropping to the pillow. “I’m a fucking animal.”

“Oh, you’re a *lot* more than that,” Lesion eagerly informed, sounding like the proud creator of a swamp Frankenstein. “You’re like... a Bayou Hematarch.”

Nitro brought his head forward, glaring at his Voodoo-freak *brother*. “Fucking English.”

Lesion’s alchemy-addictions celebrated in his passionate eyes now lasered on his. “It means... Bayou Blood King.”

Cat paced in living room, going over the morning Ethan encounter. So many things about himself he sort of revealed. *Make yourself at home. It’s also yours*, he’d added, making the situation a lot more...real than ever before. *It* was also hers. *He* was also hers. Yeah, that’s what had her pacing the floors. *He* was hers. She was *his*. With marital... stipulations. If that’s what they were even called.

She paused in the middle of the floor just to relive the feel of his lips on her forehead. *Tonight. Will you wait for me?*

Obligation had no place in it, he'd said. And then he'd turned around and said he was doing it exactly for that. Obligation. Whatever *she* wanted.

So, *she* had to want it, but *he* didn't have to?

Back to pacing and headshaking.

That wasn't right. Or fair.

Did he think as the husband that was just *his* job? Well, it was *her* job as a wife to submit to her husband, wasn't it? He'd included himself in the 'whatever she wanted he gave' department just the night before. Which meant he could *want*. So...did he *not* want it or *did* he? And why not just say so?

She stopped again. "Big G?" she called.

"Yes, Cat?" he answered, like he'd been sitting there quietly the entire time.

"Do you know about the uh...marriage arrangements between me and Ethan?"

"I do, yes."

She considered that. "Are you allowed to elaborate?"

"Ethan has asked I not contribute to the progression of your relationship. He would like to do it alone."

Huh. "Is that...a new directive?"

"Yes. Given before he left."

"To...AL too?"

"Yes. Is there anything else you would like to know that I'm permitted to speak about?"

She turned her body as an idea hit her. "Has...Ethan ever had a girlfriend?"

"He had a wife."

Oh shit. So that wasn't some metaphor. "The five minute one?"

"A week."

She paced again, wrapping her arms around her midsection. “I don’t want to pry into things he’d rather tell me himself but...I feel like...if I’m going to help him or be what he needs, I need to know what that is.”

“He should have made those needs known to you in the marriage proposal.”

Oh yeah. “He did, but...I feel like he left out a lot. The stuff I need to know to help him in other ways.”

“What other ways would that be?”

She forced herself to sit and be still. “The intimacy. I know he has needs and he’s not really...letting me do anything for that.”

“I’m sure he will get to that soon.”

Her tummy flipped at that. “He wants to...teach me things.”

“Ethan is a very capable teacher.”

Right. He’d had practice. How much, she wondered. “So... how long...was he...with this woman before they married?”

“Two years and one month.”

Wow. That’s a lot of time to...practice. “Was she from here?”

“Yes.”

Shit. “That’s not my business. I don’t even want to know, really.”

“Ethan has not forbid me to say.”

Shit, shit. “Nope. Still don’t want to know. Was she pretty?”

“He often spoke of her beauty to us.”

“To you and AL?” she wondered, her stomach knotting more.

“Yes. Ethan considers us his brothers.”

She paused at that. “Like...literally?”

“Yes.”

It suddenly hit her. “What about his real family?”

“Ethan’s mother and father abandoned him at thirteen. He has no siblings. The Bishops took him in and raised him.”

Her jaw dropped with a gasp. “Oh my God,” she whispered, her heart aching at that news. “So...he has no family?”

“AL and I are his family. And The Bishops. And now you.”

She paced in dizzying circles, hand over her mouth at that news, his handsome sweet smile flashing in her mind and stealing her breath. And heart now. She froze her steps and lowered her hand. “How...did Ethan take it when...this woman betrayed him?”

“Following the betrayal, Ethan underwent a dramatic transformation. He joined the Noctambule war and after was invited by the leader of the Bishops to become a leader in The Twelve. The celibacy requirement proved to be both sword and savior, allowing him to sever the dark ties and cut a path for new ones. The decision had a profound impact on his lifestyle choices and his psychological resilience, allowing him to channel energies elsewhere as both a coping mechanism and means of mastering his appetites.”

So... celibacy was his *safety*. Panic hit her at realizing. He was being forced to take a wife! Oh God, that’s why he didn’t *want* her! Whatever *you* want, I want.

Sickness churned her stomach. “So, Ethan doesn’t even want this.”

“Ethan very much wants this.”

“You said his celibacy saved his life! And now he’s being forced to get a wife, a-a woman, a stranger,” she

realized, horrified, “to do things that nearly killed him before? Are you shitting me here?”

“Ethan has grown to realize that while he doesn’t have the power to change the past, he can use it to rewrite his future.”

Cat came to a halt at those precious words, nodding. “You’re so right.” She considered what he was probably going through. Plenty of worry and fear. “Which explains all his parameters he’s put up.”

“The parameters serve as both a guard and learning tool.”

It suddenly dawned on her. His parameters in their marriage arrangement were tactical maneuvers in the name of self-preservation. With just cause.

But then...

She turned, feeling like Big G was on her right for some reason. “He chose me because I didn’t need a man or sex. Doesn’t sound to me like he’s wanting to rewrite anything but rather pretend he’s rewriting something.”

“Perhaps, yes,” Big G said, his tone begging for interpretation.

“I heard a big unless in that one.” She was pacing again. “I bet AL is dying to talk right now and tell me all the missing pieces.”

“He is.”

Cat had to snicker at that one. “Big brother wanting to protect?”

“Little brother wanting to help his big brother find real happiness.”

Cat froze, putting her hand over the pain biting in her chest at that one. “Well...I want to help. If I knew how.”

“Just let him lead,” Big G said.

“Are you sure?” she wondered, not convinced with that. “He seems to be moving in a different direction than you think.”

“In this, the road is what will direct the destination.”

“To his true happiness?” she felt like she needed to double-check.

“To what truly fulfills him.”

Which was what? “Does he even know what that is?”

“The road he’s on will remind him what has always fulfilled him and how to achieve it again.”

“Again? He’s been fulfilled before? Please don’t say with that girl who betrayed him.”

“Okay.”

“It is!?” she cried with a blasted breath. “I do not want to be her replacement!”

“She was never the *one*, Cat. But I believe you are a more succinct fit.”

She paused at that, her pulse roaring. “And...what does AL think?”

“AL’s data has been heavily influenced by the emotional and psychological traumas of Ethan over the years.”

“Which amounts to he doesn’t approve of me.”

“He does not.”

Okay. That was a big ouch. “Why?” she whispered, so damn sad about it.

“I’m afraid that answer would violate Ethan’s directive for staying out of it.”

Right. “And if I ask, he’ll know we’ve been talking,” she also realized. “I don’t want to get anybody in trouble but...I need to know things. I’ll try to find a way to learn my answers without ratting on anybody.”

“We hold your concern in high regard with much appreciation.”

Huh. “AL too?”

“Yes. AL too.”

Ethan couldn't believe all the shit that happened in the twelve hours he'd been with Cat. “He's still at the hospital?” he asked Bishop.

“Yes, and Felix. Mostly she's there because he is. They moved her bed in the basement with his, last I heard.”

“What about Samuel's dad? They know what's wrong with him?”

“Other than he's in a coma, no fucking clue. Samuel refuses to leave his bedside. Keeps saying he has to hold his hand. I don't know what that means but seeing him like that gutted me. A son terrified to lose his father. Again. I'm sure you can relate.”

“I'm sure I can't,” he was positive. “Thankfully, I lost the ability to feel anything where they're concerned. I have as much emotion for them as I have for a paperclip.”

“I know what it's like to need to kill things. But it's also messy and can deaden the parts you may need later.”

Something about that felt true for Ethan and he almost asked for details. Maybe later. He remembered his reason for calling. “You mentioned mandatory classes for The Twelve. I'm ready for the resources required for that. You mentioned... physical things.”

Ethan usually enjoyed hearing his Eveque laugh but not in regard to this. He took a breath, waiting for him to finish.

“So, you’re already there, are you?”

“Just want to see what’s coming so I can plan for it.”

“Oui, oui, and that’s very important. I think I heard my Belle Eveque say she will be emailing things to those who have that capability. Would you like the material delivered like this?”

Hmm. That would mean Big G and AL would see it.
“Is there a physical copy I can borrow for now?”

“Oh, you can also order a copy,” he remembered.
“Ours is a bit...worn.”

“Oh,” Ethan said, his disgust coming through which put Eveque in hysterics. “You sound like a man needing a lot of comic relief.”

He finally caught his breath with a dramatic,
“Ouuuuuuuuuuuu!”

“Maybe Belle Eveque can print a copy for me. My printer is being stupid.”

“I’ll let her know immediately.”

“Thank you.”

“Mmhmm. Done.”

“Oh, you already did it.”

“Oui, mon Pierre,” he barely chided. “I have your back, I told you this. And where is your lil menou now?”

“Waiting for me at my home,” he said, ready to get that reveal out of the way.”

“The Hack House?”

“No, my actual home.”

“Mon Dieu, this is really serious!”

“Must you? Constantly? Geeze,” he muttered, moving the phone from his ear when his laughter returned with a vengeance. “Therapeutic?” he called around the racket.

“Oh ouiiii,” he bellowed, again catching his breath.

“What about you, what has you in such desperate straits you’d torture the elite of The Twelve?”

“Shall I list it?” Bishop asked.

“If it helps.”

“Nitro, poor Felix, Seer and his father, the fucking cunt ex mole whore, a hurricane right on track still, my daughter dating my new son, and my son dating my new daughter. Oh and Hurricane walking in on my Mah-Mah and Pah-Pah fucking like rabbits in the bath house.”

8-Bit busted out laughing at that. “You’re kidding.”

“You should have heard him. How it used to be a respectable place now people were fucking all over the lawns.”

8-Bit howled with Bishop now, imagining it. “He’s so fucking ready for a woman, isn’t he?”

“Dieu, oui!” Bishop said with great emphasis.

A dense ache filled him suddenly and it dawned on him how much he missed gathering with his brothers. “Hey, I wanted to ask where that Swamp Stop is that has women’s clothes. Can’t remember the name of it.”

“Jolie Denelle?”

“Yes. Where the hell is that again?”

“That’s on the outskirts of Bacon’s hatch I believe. I think you go five minutes north from the mainland and hang a left at the Devil’s Wrist.”

“I remember now. Haven’t been out that way in a while.”

“So, you dressing your lil menou?”

He gave up with him. “I am.”

“Exciting times, oui?” he fished.

“You see what she wears?”

“When it comes to seeing women, mon frier, there will only ever be one I see.”

Ethan had to grin, liking that. “Let’s just say if I was looking fas-fas I might miss she’s a woman.”

“And when you don’t look fas-fas?” he wondered, laughter in his words.

“Then I see I want to dress her differently,” he said.

“And this does not terrify you?” he asked.

8-Bit paused, realizing it was a joke and yet somehow not. “A little,” he dared.

“Ahhh,” he said softly. “I can testify that there is no place more dreadful than the arms of a reckless chance. And no place more glorious.”

8-Bit nodded, eyeing the serene swamp around him while his inner eyes stared into the looming storm. “It’s because of you that I’m at this ledge. And I don’t mean because you voted it into code, I mean because of what I see in you. The changes. I may have gotten a little...inspired by this reckless chance you took.” The silence on the line stretched and 8-Bit realized. “It took a lot of courage and I thought...if my Eveque can do it then so can I.”

“Oui,” he said with that odd soft strength. “It’s a chance we must all be man enough to take. And one worth taking.”

“Top rated horror stuff.”

“Oui, brother,” he said, knowing he was dead serious.

“Nothing wrong with taking it slow with boundaries.”

“Absolutely,” Eveque said. “I insisted on the same with me and Beth.”

“You did?”

“I did. No sex till she knew without a doubt what she wanted. Not what I wanted. This angel would give her life if she thought it pleased me. It’s her kindness disease and I’m still training her to discover her own pleasures outside of mine.”

Ethan was at the edge of his seat now, realizing Cat did that very thing earlier but not for the same reason. She wanted to know if he wanted her. Pretty sure Belle Eveque at least knew that much about Eveque’s feelings for her. Maybe he could bend the rules just enough to let her know he wanted her and it had nothing to do with obligations and sexless agreements.

Maybe he should just tell Eveque.

“Ah, speaking of the angel. Call me later, oui?”

“Oui.”

He hung up and found Cat’s number, his thumb hovering over it. Why was he calling? To check on her. He pressed the button and put the phone to his ear.

“Ethan?”

Her eager greeting spoke to his cock, and he suddenly realized her words had nothing else to speak to in him.

I know what it’s like to need to kill things. But it’s also messy and can deaden things you may need to feel later.

“Hey,” he said, shoving everything but this moment off the nearest proverbial cliff. “You doing okay?”

“Other than being bored out of my mind, yes.”

“Big G hasn’t kept you company?” he asked, digging a little.

“He has. As much as he’s allowed,” she added, light chiding in her tone.

“You’ve been prying?” he chided lightly back with a smile.

“A tiny bit but only things that I think are important to know.”

He shrugged. “You can ask me anything.”

“Well, f—”

“But not on the phone,” he chuckled.

She let out a breath. “Fine. What time is this awesome later date, anyway?”

Later date.

“I’ll be home in maybe less than two hours. I’ll cook for you.”

“Oh good,” she said coolly. “I’ll ask questions while you do.”

“Fun,” he said, positive he’d enjoy watching her dig with nosy enthusiasm into his personal life. “I’ll need to ask you questions too.”

“Well, I’m an open book,” she assured. “Guess I might take Big G up on his lavender bath to burn time.”

Oh fuck. “You should.”

“I will.”

His cock yanked every which way, desperate for one word in. “Do me a favor,” he said, his pulse a hammer in his balls.

“Favors now, huh?”

“Just one.”

She gave a dramatic sigh. “What can I do for you?”

He held his breath, closing his eyes. “I want... you to...” Ah fuck. “Enjoy your bath.”

She sputtered out a little laugh. “Well, I think I can manage that. Maybe I’ll call and harass you while I’m at it.”

“During your bath?” he asked, back in the flames.

She was quiet a moment. “Yes,” she dared in a tiny test.

“Do it. I might ask you questions then.”

“Same,” she said, her arousal shaking that one little word as well as his whole world.

“I’ll be waiting.”

“Good. Now I’m not the only one. Later gator.”

CHAPTER THREE

Samuel popped his head up at feeling Maggie's touch on his shoulder. He spotted the small notebook on the bed, already knowing what it was. He watched as she hurried out the room, their eyes locking just before the room door shut.

He turned to the notebook, a sick dread swimming in his stomach. He glanced at his father and searched for any signs of change in his peaceful face. Finding none, he moved the notebook closer, adjusting his father's hand in his as he opened the cover.

His breath held at the first picture. A girl. Maybe seven. She seemed familiar. He stared, touching the grooved lines on the paper while waiting for something more to come.

Turning the page, he found what seemed to be the same girl.

He turned the page back, looking for differences. She sat in a ball with both arms covering her head. Not finding any difference, he went on, finding a third drawing of the same girl. Same pose. He flipped and found the same on the next. And the next. He finally stopped when the pictures changed to another girl. Older now. Maybe the same one?

By the time he got to the end of the notebook, he was frustrated with how little he got from any of it. He paused at the last girl, staring at her. He was sure it was Belle Eveque. He stared into the eyes, feeling something. He tilted his head trying to understand what felt obvious. He held up the book now, trying for another angle. Her eyes followed him in each, taunting him with an important secret. Why was she the last picture?

He set the tablet on the bed and laid his head next to it, wrapping his father's hand in both of his now. The need to hold on to him was strong as ever. Sometimes the urges lessened, and it scared him when that happened. He never stopped except for bathroom breaks. And when he returned, he held him tighter than ever with both hands, stepping up his spiritual warfare.

His phone rang next to him, and he looked. Eveque. He answered with a quiet, "Hey."

"You want company?"

"Ah. I'm fine."

"Maybe so, but our Belle Eveque said she wants to come visit."

Seer straightened a little. "Okay. She said that?"

"Oui," he said. "Why?"

He shook his head. "Just...I don't know."

"How's your father?"

He glanced at him. "Same."

"Hope you're hungry for some of Mah-Mah's chicken and sausage gumbo she's loaded us up with food for a week."

He smiled. Mah-Mah. "I would love some. Although Justine cooks a mean crab-cake."

"Bon Dieu, I know this. That's why she works there. Her food is what miracles are made of, oui?"

"Oui," he muttered, smiling.

"See you in swamp sec."

Patches paused on the listing *Medical Cattle Tags with real time readings*. Was a shot in the dark but maybe it would

work for what they needed. He paused in astonishment as he read *Used only one season for tracking bat infestations on ranch. Can be modified for other uses.* “Holy mother of miracles.” They sure didn’t have time to wait for 8-bit to build something that detected markers in blood, but he’d thought *surely* the medical field had something close they could modify. Something like radio frequency identification tags coupled with a biosensor mechanism where they got real time readings of Nitro’s blood, alerting them when levels got dangerous.

Facebook Marketplace had been his final hail Mary in his search. “Come on Tegan from Texas,” he muttered, hitting the *Is this item still available* button on the message box. “Give me the goods, bruh.”

He shut the laptop and headed out to make his final rounds before the dinner bell. Ms. Justine had his stomach in a mean growl since three that afternoon with her famous crab cakes. Too bad she wasn’t forty years younger, he’d snatch that up for his wife in a marsh minute.

Patches peeked into Mr. Leblanc’s room, finding him staring longingly out the window from his bed. “Hey Pacey, how you doing?”

The old man’s tired face lit up on him. “Meh good and you-self?”

“I’m hungry like a swamp rat after smelling Ms. Jusitne’s cooking.”

He gave a big toothless laugh. “Meh yeah?”

Patches stopped at his bed, sitting. “Lemme take a peek at that mean bite.” He moved the covers off his feet where the bandages protected the muskrat bite on his shin. “Pain’s all gone?”

“All gone. But meh, it itches yeah?”

He laughed, carefully unwrapping it. “Itching is good. Oh yes, this is good,” he said, inspecting it.

“What you tink?”

“I think you’re all better is what I think. Don’t need these anymore, either.” He gathered the bandages and tossed them in the trash.

“What dat means?” he asked, sounding like he’d come to think he’d never leave.

“It means you won the *go home* swamp-lottery.”

His gray bushy brows shot up. “Fo real?”

“For real,” he nodded. “Who you want me to call? Unless you wanna spend the night with me one more night.”

“Shooooo I like you,” he said, his big laugh coming. “But not dat much. Meh call mah sister, she can come get me.”

Patches laughed real good at that. “At least eat supper with me before you go.”

“Meh I’ll say yes if you hep me out this bed.”

“You got it,” Patches said, gently easing him to the edge. “I’ll get your clothes. You want to shower before heading out, you can. You can use some of Mah-Mah’s Miracle Man soap for Mrs. Leblanc.”

Patches laughed at how funny he thought that was. The old man aimed a crooked finger at him, light in his little half-moon eyes. “She might put me back in the hospital if I come home smellin’ too good, yeah?”

Patches died laughing as he shuffled slowly along with him, arm hooked in his in case he decided to fall. Pacey would be hack if he had to spend another day there with him, this he knew.

Beth stilled when Sahvrin opened the hospital room door and Samuel's head resting on the bed came into view. The sight of his dad's hand firmly grasped between his, stirred the pain in her chest. Sahvrin squeezed her upper arms, his eyes on her. But she couldn't stop looking at their Seer. Their strong, kind Samuel, so broken and desperate there. The man who always had the answers for others was now bowed over a bed, just a little boy wanting his Mon Pier. When she heard Spook tell Bishop the story, she couldn't get the vision of him crying frantically for his dad out of her head. God, her heart was broken for him. She wanted him to know he wasn't alone. Everybody was praying with him.

He suddenly raised his head, aiming weary blue eyes at them, then gave a weak smile that broke her heart more. "Hey," he called quietly. "Good to see you two."

Beth hurried over and wrapped her arms around him, holding on to him for many seconds. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Thank you," he whispered back, his hand stroking her head. Even while broken, he managed to comfort others. "Thank you for coming, Mah Belle Eveque."

She straightened and looked at his father. He could've been sleeping other than the oxygen tubes connected to him. "He's okay?"

He nodded and she eyed his hands, grasping his father's. She moved closer to the bed and covered their joined hands with hers.

Seer suddenly stood and she turned, finding his gaze aimed at her, tears making them glow the brightest blue she'd ever seen.

"Beth," he whispered, covering her hand with his other one.

She sucked in a breath at the hot vibration passing through her fingers and palm, holding his stare. "Seer?"

His eyes slowly closed and tears slipped down his face. A sudden rush of sorrow brought her gasp. "Please...Belle Eveque. Help me," he whispered.

He pressed their hands tightly together and another wave of energy zapped through her. Panic brought her other hand on top of his as she stared at him trapped in a current of powers. "I don't...I don't know what to do," she said, breathless.

"Tell him...to come back," he said, his words shaking. "Tell them...to let him go."

His mouth trembled as he stared at her, the hot energy spreading through her till she fought for air. "Let him go," she gasped, closing her eyes. A darkness suddenly circled her, thick and hard, pressing into her body and chest then lungs. Panicked, she sucked in a sharp breath and yelled, "LET HIM GO!"

She stumbled back, hitting somebody, her terrified gaze locked on his father shaking in the bed.

"Beth," Bishop called at her ear, his arms around her as she covered her mouth, watching in horror as Samuel covered his father's thrashing body, yelling "Mon Piere! Come back to me! Let him go!"

Patches flew into the room and her breaths came ragged as she dug her nails into Bishops arms. "Come back," she gasped, blinking tears from her vision as they fought to remove Samuel. "Come back, come back to him," she wailed, reaching toward him. "COME BACK TO HIM!"

"Oh fuck," Bishop shot out, jerking her in reverse as Ruckus shot up in the bed with wide eyes and growling breaths bellowing out of him.

Patches collapsed onto his little cot, throwing his arm over his face. What. A fucking. Day.

He sat up before he passed out. The night was still young for him with the Hurricane on his ass. So much to do still.

He forced himself off the bed, sitting at the little desk and opening the laptop. He clicked the Facebook tab. “Yes,” he muttered, opening the message box. “Still available, thank you Texas.”

He typed, needing to verify what this thing did. *Can you verify this tool can read blood markers? And if it can, how soon can I get this?* He considered what else to say. *Had a case of bat attacks and need it immediately.*

He went to his email to check on his shipment of birthing kit supplies. Please let it get here by tomorrow. He had three pregnant patients nearing delivery and didn’t want to be caught without plenty of everything.

Hearing a ping, he hurried to his Facebook tab. *Yes, it can. It’s ready to go and I can deliver. Will even set up and give a demonstration, no extra charge. Where are you located?*

“Wow, fucking nice.” He typed, *Atchafalaya Basin, Louisiana. Can pay extra for those services.*

Not necessary. Call me to set something up. 555-555-2308. Tegan.

He pulled his phone from his pocket, not about to lose that. He made his way to the resident apartment downstairs, ready for a shower.

“Tegan speaking.”

He paused his steps at the female voice. “Yeah, I’m the one from Market Place needing that bat equipment.”

“Mr. Patches,” she said with a ball-busting-at-your-service tone. “How soon do you need this and how will you be paying?”

“Needed it yesterday and I’ll be paying cash.”

“Not sure how paying cash will work,” she informed in the same sturdy way.

“I would want to go see the equipment in action first if that’s at all possible. If it’s what I need, I’ll drive it back down myself.”

“If I’m going to help you set it up, I’d take it in my truck.”

“Okay,” he said. “Exactly what all does the equipment do.”

“It feeds your animal’s biometric data to a computer. You set what sort of readouts you want, and it gives it real time, twenty-four seven. We had a bat epidemic about five years back. Flock of rabid ones got a hold of our steers and decided to use them as a feasting ground. We lost fifty head of cattle, and half a million in profit. Lot of good this gear did, couple weeks after tagging our stock, those ugly sonsabitches all left for whatever reason. My father is selling the ranch and I’m blessed with the task of finding a buyer for everything, seeing as I’m not much into that lifestyle anymore. I’m opening a business for a line of cowboy boots and this sale would go to that venture.”

Patches paused, considering all that information. “Well...since you’ll be here, you may as well check out the alligator surplus. I have family here that would likely be happy to make some kind of trade.”

“For alligator skins?”

“For alligator anything,” he assured.

“You with these Bishop people I’m looking at on your page?”

“I am.”

“Are yall like a family business?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“Well, ain’t that somethin,’” she said, like she’d hit the jackpot. They both had so far. “When you comin have a look, then?”

“Tomorrow, if I can.”

“Alright. I can call J-J over to meet with us here. He’s just my daddy’s hired hand. ‘Parently I still need babysittin’ and defending.”

And clearly she disagreed. He imagined a twig of a thing chewing on hay with a huge cowgirl hat on her too tiny head. “Yeah, that works. I’ll be coming alone if that’s okay.”

“Suit yourself. J-J’s plenty capable. What time you thinkin’ of coming?”

“What time’s good for you?”

“Noon.”

He considered that. “Sounds good. Where are you exactly?”

“Thirty miles from Waco. When you’re ready to ride, call and I’ll give you exacts. Work for you?”

“Yes ma’am it does.”

“Alrighty then. Message if you have anymore questions before that. Thank you Mr. Patches.”

“And thank you, Miss Tegan.

Patches pushed off the wall and made his way to the bathroom. Two miracles in one day. First Ruckus, then this. He hoped they continued on through this hurricane coming. He hoped even more that they wouldn’t need any.

Ethan let off the gas on the boat at seeing Cat’s name on his phone. He was already headed back. “You fell asleep in the tub or what?”

“No, I fell in the damn bayou is where I fell. I found your fishing poles in that shed and thought I’d like to throw a line in while bathing, maybe have fresh fish for you to cook me. I swear to high heaven I tripped on a blade of *air*, tried to catch my balance, and took a plunge.”

“Are you okay?” he asked, hitting the gas again.

“I’m fine, other than too gross for a lavender bath. I used your shower, I hope that was okay. Big G helped and it’s a good thing too, there ain’t a single damn handle or anything in that thing,” she cried like it was outrageous.

Fuck, he couldn’t wait to see her. “I’m ten minutes away.”

“Well, good, cause I’m all clean and *back* to bored. I’ll be glad when poor AL can come out and play, I think Big G is already sick of me.”

He chuckled. “I doubt that. And AL doesn’t like to play. You’re not missing anything.”

“Why exactly don’t you want him talking to me? That’s one of my questions by the way.”

“Because he has no filter.”

“Well...what in swamp’s snout does he say like that?”

“Things inappropriate for a woman to hear.”

“You gave him a foul mouth?”

“You can say that.”

“Why?” she cried, sounding like she half smiled.

“Well, I love Big G but after a bit, you want somebody that talks less...”

“Nerdy?”

“Yes. Less formality.”

“Well, he fixed that with me. Now he talks so I don’t need a dictionary. So, what you been up to? Where’d you go, what you see, who’d you talk to and why?”

He laughed at all her questions.

“What?” she laughed back. “I’m a nosy female, you better get used to it.”

He’d better, that’s for sure. “Well, I meant to tell you, we’re required to take classes.”

“What kind? Who requires it?”

“The Belle Eveque. Some kind of marriage classes.”

She sucked in a breath with an “Awww, ain’t that sweet of her. And smart! I need all the help I can get with that as you know.”

“I do.”

“Oh geeze, thanks,” she sputtered, no doubt turning that sexy shade of pink.

“I’m teasing you. I like teasing you.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Do you,” he said. “You should be hearing me soon.

“You on that ear-raper?”

Too funny. “Well, if I was, you wouldn’t need to ask,” he laughed.

“Huh.”

“That reminds me...”

“Yeah? What does it remind you of,” she muttered, words still smiling.

“How do you feel about forced sex?” He laughed at her gasp. “I’m kidding.”

“Are you...” she wondered. “Given that past of yours, I have to wonder.”

“What are you wondering? Three minutes away.”

“What exact kind of things you...prefer. I mean, our arrangement does include that *whatever you want* clause and

whatever *I* want. Must mean you have preferences?”

“I do. I prefer you deciding that.” He smiled at her little growl.

“I prefer to know *your* preference.”

“I thought I just told you that,” he chuckled.

“Ethan, I’m serious!” The little beg in her voice jerked his cock. “I can handle it.”

“It must be this way, petite menou. You first.”

“*Then* you?”

“Oui.”

“How long for me?”

“However long I think.”

She gave a long sigh. “Boy, you are *really* testing me.”

“Boy,” he repeated with a mild shake of his head. “You’re provoking me?”

“Oh...is that a thing with you? You got buttons to press?”

“I sure do,” he said, maybe hinted, maybe begged.

“I’ll ask Big G about them. Or AL.”

“AL won’t tell.”

“Big G will.”

“No,” he laughed. “He won’t. I’m here, petite menou.”

“Oh, he will,” she assured easily. “I figured that one out.”

“Did you,” he mused.

“He’s a lot like my Pah-Pah. You have to learn how to beat around that bush.”

“Do that and you’ll find yourself *really* bored.”

She sucked in a breath. “You can’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Punish Big G cuz of me!”

“You remember he’s a machine?”

“He’s nice to me! And he helps me. With things. Did you know he can *whisper*?”

8-Bit laughed. “I did. If you whisper to him, he will whisper back. Why is petite menou whispering to Big G?”

She sputtered a little, making him laugh more. “It was early, and I didn’t want to be loud is all. When will you let me meet AL?”

“Never,” he was pretty sure with that abrupt change of subject.

“Why?” she said, stomping the word as he hopped out the boat and tied it off.

“Because AL would be a bad influence.” And get him into a lot of trouble.

“And whose fault is that?”

He grabbed the day’s haul in one hand and hopped on the pier. “Mine,” he said, heading toward the house while looking around. “Where are you?”

“I’m in heaven on this back porch of course. Where are you?”

“Making my way there. I have things for you.”

“Me?”

He chuckled at the childish repeat. “Yes, you.”

“Like what?”

Her poorly masked excitement said she rarely got gifts. He’d sure be happy to change that. Turned out buying her things came with an eroticism he’d never enjoyed before.

“Better not be something silly like flowers,” she warned.

“Not flowers.” He held the phone with his shoulder and unlatched the side gate, pushing his way through. “You shouldn’t be out at night alone.”

“Why?” she whine/wondered.

He stepped onto the porch and dropped the bags, getting her happy smile when she turned. “You’re back,” she said on the phone still.

He turned off the phone and slid it in his pocket as the need to touch her filled his every cell, followed by celibacy habits locking him down tight.

She set her phone on the table, crossing her arms while eyeing the bags. “My present is in that?”

Her curiosity lit her eyes, making him want to get lost in them. “All of it is yours.”

Those eyes widened with the drop of her jaw. “All?” She eyed him. “Can I look now?”

“Yes,” he grinned. “I’m gonna grab a shower in the guest bathroom while you do.” She wet her lips, oblivious to her arousal dancing before him. He turned when the need to kiss her became life or death. “Wear the red dress tonight,” he said before stopping in the doorway. “Come in so I can lock up.”

She snatched the two bags from the porch and hurried in, flashing him a look that reminded him of that brand new woman he’d wakened with her first orgasm. Begging. It was more than the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. It was the stuff adoration was made of.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cat stared at the bags on the bed, scared to look at what was in them. “Big G,” she whispered, her heart pounding.

“Yes, Cat?” he whispered back.

“Do you know what’s in these bags?”

“I do not.”

“Forgot he’s keeping secrets from you too.”

“He’s doing things on his own as I suggested, for a fuller learning experience.”

She paused with that. “That was smart Big G,” she whispered, venturing closer to the bag. “I know it’s clothes. I’m scared.”

“Of what?” he asked, still whispering.

“Of...seeing what kind of woman he wants. That I might not be.”

“You are already the woman he wants. He’s merely dressing you for that part now.”

She looked down at her overalls. “Cause dressing like a man ain’t exactly pretty?”

“It has a certain bayou charm.”

She snickered. “Ethan taught you how to lie nicely?”

“I merely present the data that I’m given and learn from it.”

“Yeah?” She peered in the first bag, sucking in a breath. “And who’s feeding you this data?”

“Ethan does.”

“I knew that, it was a sarcastic question. He didn’t teach you sarcasm?” she wondered, pulling the first red things she spotted out.

“I leave the sarcasm and funny business to AL.”

“Oh my, look at this dress,” she squealed, putting it up against her. “Oh God, please let it fit. He wants me to wear the red one.”

“While I cannot see it, given the data I have of you, I believe it will look lovely.”

She smiled and sat, looking up then left. “Thank you. Now, if you don’t mind, I need a little privacy to change.”

“My eyes are closed tight.”

She busted out in quiet laughter. “You make jokes?”

“I can.”

“I thought you weren’t like AL?”

“Jokes and what AL does is not in the same universe.”

She dropped her jaw with a laugh. “I won’t try to trick you into telling me what the heck that means but I *will* find out. I plan to make Ethan tell me.”

“I’m rooting for you.”

“Can you lock the door?” she wondered.

The sound of the lock engaging sent her giddily scrambling out of her swamp clothes and into the beautiful red summer dress with the crimply top that served as its own bra. How convenient.

She dug around through all the clothes, looking for panties. None. Did that mean he didn’t want her to wear them or didn’t want her to because she normally didn’t? Obviously, the purpose of panties were different when married. Weren’t they? She dug through the second bag and found the truth of the matter. Ten to be exact. “Look how many panties!?” She

snatched up the red lacy pair, her heart thrashing like a trapped gator as she put them on.

Remembering the wall mirror in the bathroom, she hurried to it, staring at herself. “Oh wow,” she whispered, turning left then right. “It fits!” she squealed, yanking up the dress to check the panties next. Her excitement turned rabid at the sight. She stepped closer to the mirror to see what her private parts looked like or if you could see it at all. Her stomach churned at not only seeing it but seeing what she’d done. Earlier, she’d dared to ask Big G about what *some* men liked for a woman to do sexually and the *shave* one had shocked her. She had to ask the questions many ways to clarify he definitely meant remove *all* the hair from down there.

‘Till it has no hair like a... three-year-old vagina?’

And when she’d *done* it. Oh. Dear. God. She was ready to run away at what that looked like. A *bald* vagina. It was *awful*. And *so weird looking!* She ended up tricking Big G into telling her that Ethan *could* have been one of the men in that bald-vagina-loving scenario. God, she prayed she hadn’t tricked him into the wrong answer. He didn’t always mean what she thought he did, and she’d be *horrified* if it turned out he thought it was disgusting like she did.

She turned to see what her butt looked like, remembering why she hated panties as she dug the delicate material already lost in her cracks and crevices.

Heat pummeled her at remembering the way he’d stared at her down there. Pretty sure he’d liked it. Hope he liked her in the panties. And dress. “I kinda wish you had eyes Big G,” she whispered, swallowing.

“I kind of wish I did too, Cat.”

She sucked in a breath. “Ethan made you sweet and romantic didn’t he,” she accused. “Can I assume it’s because Ethan is sweet and romantic at heart?”

“That assumption aligns well with the available data on Ethan’s character traits. Therefore, your inference would be

statistically probable.”

“And then you get all nerdy,” she muttered with a grin. “Oh swamp-sally what about this hair?” she said, eyeing it.

“Based on my data, Ethan demonstrates a preference for organic aesthetics as opposed to artificial or enhanced features.”

“Guess that’s fancy speak for ‘stick to clean hair, brushed and presentable.’

She hurried to her bag and returned to the bathroom, dragging the brush through her hair the prescribed three hundred strokes for a natural bounce and shine. She stared at the finished product, tucking hair behind her left ear. Then right. She removed the hair from the left. Simple and natural. Tucking hair behind an ear was simple and natural. But was it the kind of simple and natural he liked?

She removed the hair and brushed the sides again till it reminded her of a shiny coat of... sun-dried dead moss. Frickn gross. “This is as good as it gets,” she said to herself.

“It’s everything that Ethan wants.”

She was damn sure that wasn’t true. “Out of the limited selection he had you mean.”

“Yes.”

That’s what I thought.

“Well, this is it. Doesn’t get any more natural and plain. Maybe I should wear my hair up.”

“Ethan likes long hair.”

Panic hit her. “Well mine’s not long!” she accused. “Ugh, never mind,” she self-scolded. “I’m talking us both into a crazy corner with my vain nonsense. I don’t care what people think. Usually. Ethan is different because we have a business arrangement and I’m trying to be...worth the investment or choice he made.”

“Yes.”

He was down to single answers. He was definitely a fast learner.

Cat left the mirror, remembering she was capable of breaking out in hives when overly stressed. Wouldn't that be a sexy look.

Ethan heard Cat enter the kitchen and had to deploy every single celibate firewall he'd created to stop himself from immediately turning. He needed to maintain his controlled front with her. And what a front it was. Losing her over his bullshit past was his go-to for executing his plan of follow the leader where he made Cat the leader.

Where would she lead them? That was the question that had all circuits lit up. Along with how long he could maintain his façade before he took the lead from her. Then what fate awaited them?

“Well? What do you think?”

A direct question, thank God. He turned, letting himself devour her for exactly five seconds before facing the stove again. He raced through his mind for a suitable compliment given their arrangement. “You brought dessert.” Ah, fuck.

She gave the cutest giggle. “I look like a candy apple, don't I? What you cookin' for me?” She took in a breath and let it out on a sigh. “I'm so spoiled here. I could sure get used to this.”

He lowered the fire on the fish stew and turned. Her gaze got stuck on his opened button up shirt temptation. “If I'm dessert, what are you?”

Always boldly teasing. “I don't know.” He made his way to the small table and sat before her, letting his shirt fall open more. “Since I'm your husband, you tell me what I am.”

She took the question seriously and chewed on the corner of her lip, staring right at his body. “I’d say you belong in the meat department. With those... shish kebabs.”

“So not a main course meal?”

Her forehead took on an incredulous crimp. “Have you seen the shish kebabs at Theriots Meat Market? That’s a whole meal in one. Not even room for dessert,” she said with her cute Cat assurance.

There was no stopping his grin, the one he only ever gave to her. “Well, to be more specific, you don’t look like a candy apple, but my favorite cherry pie.”

“Wow...a whole pie?”

He nodded, loving the pink in her cheeks and the playful spark in her eyes. “A whole pie.”

“I’m a lotta slices?”

He lowered his gaze on her. “I don’t slice my pie. I eat it from the very center. One, slow bite at a time. A little every day till its entirely consumed by me.”

She covered her face with both hands with a squeak and, “You win. I can’t play this game with you, you’re too good at it.” She lowered her hands, her face redder than ever as she looked around. “You said you had questions for me. You can ask if you want.” She moved her gaze to her lap where she twirled her wedding ring on her finger.

After his shower, Patches decided to text Miss Tegan Texas back, remembering the Hurricane. *Not sure if you know but there’s that Hurricane due here Tuesday evening. If you want to wait till after that blows over to do this, I’d understand.*

He angled his head, hearing mumbling. He made his way to the noise then remembered Nitro and Felix were down there.

His phone buzzed and he looked.

Doesn't take but an hour to set up and an hour tops to demonstrate. If you're game, I'm game. Life don't care about the wind and the rain no matter how mean they howl. I can always stay at a hotel if need be.

If there was one available.

Not about to talk her out of it. If push came to shove, she could bunk at one of their community shelters. *Sounds good.*

You mentioned a gator-trader. Got any names I can run down? Would like to conduct business while there.

He made his way to the screened porch on the backside of the hospital and took a seat in one of the rocking chairs. He texted, *We have an alligator wrangler that can help you. She knows the scoop on that kind of thing.*

She???

Juliette Bishop. Only daughter of the Bishops, the family that runs these swamps.

Wow. That's really cool. Need any boot shops out there by any chance?

She added a worried-face emoji and he let a half snort go. *We have every manner of Swamp Stop out here but I can't recall one that majored in boots only.*

Swamp Stop?

What we call the stores we have scattered in our swamp.

I like that. But be straight with me. What kind of profit do I stand to make if I was to set up a shop around there?

In the swamp itself, enough to earn bread to eat I'd say. We have twelve communities out here with about three thousand bodies per. We're a simple people. The fancy things are mostly trinkets for tourists.

I'm not sold on exactly what sort of shop I want. I'm willing to bend with the market.

The swamps get plenty of tourists, that's for sure. Closer to the mainland, you could do well since this is Mardis Gras and Crawfish Capital. With the right product and location, you wouldn't need to work more than twice a year.

Now, that's good to know. What kind of work you do out there if I can ask?

I'm a doctor in my Hatch.

Your Hatch?

Just what we call the communities out here. He pulled out his pack of rolled joints from his front shirt coat pocket, nibbling one out with his lips.

Interesting. Would you mind if I call, I suddenly have a lot more questions and I frikn hate texting. A no would be entirely understandable.

You can.

He set his phone on his leg and drew out his zippo, flicking it twice. He put the joint tip in the frame and sucked as his phone buzzed.

“Hey,” he answered, holding the smoke in his lungs.

“Hey yourself, I hope this isn't rude.”

He released his breath, spitting a speck of weed off his tongue. “Nah. What you wanna know?”

“Well...here's the thing. Not to plow you with my personal woes, but I'm ready for a change of scenery. I was raised and bred on a ranch full of boys and brothers, the only daughter. If I never see another steer as long as I live...well you know the saying.”

“Yeah.”

“Daddy’s got this thing in his head about me taking the business side over because I’m good with the numbers. But I sure don’t want dealings in cattle. Problem is, all my connections are ranch related so I figured I wouldn’t mind so much dabbling in the fashion side of it to get myself started in something. Not that I give a hoot n holler bout such things but a whole lot of people around here do, so, marketability and all.”

“Right, and those connections,” he added, sucking in another hit.

“Exactly. Thing is, Daddy’s one of them connections and his tether is a bit short and is rubbing more than my neck raw. If I’m gonna get out from under his hoof, I’m gonna need something he won’t refuse.”

“Who’s your Daddy?” he wondered, remembering they had contacts in that area. “We might know him through our bartering systems.”

She shot out a laugh. “I ain’t never saw my daddy barter a single cent.”

“Pecan Gap. Believe we trade meat for mods.”

“Mods?”

“Modified vehicles. The Bishop’s eldest son owns Mods and Rods here in Breaux Bridge.”

“Holy Moly, I know Mods and Rods. Daddy got his Harley Electra Glide customized there!”

“And now you have a Bayou connection.”

“Well, I’ll be,” she muttered. “A small world, ain’t it?”

“That it is,” he said, releasing another hit of smoke as the sound of Mr. Pacey’s ride got there. “Hey, I got a patient leaving the hospital tonight,” he said standing. “I need to go see him off. I’ll call you for those coordinates before heading out tomorrow. Text if you have any more questions.”

“Well, you got a deal there, Dr. Swamp.”

“Alright, Texas Tegan.”

Ruckus could hardly wait for everybody to leave the room because what he needed to tell his son wasn't anything he wanted other ears to hear.

The second the door shut, he did the other thing he'd been needing to do and grabbed his son, bear hugging the hell out of him. “You saved my life,” he whispered.

“How?” Samuel asked, his voice tight.

He set him before him, his pulse still hammering. “They took me, but you refused to let me go. I found a place in my mind they couldn't reach but I also couldn't get out. Maggie saw everything but I wasn't sure she'd know what was happening.”

“She brought a notebook full of pictures. Mostly all of girls, many the same ones.”

“I saw the lady behind the white wall,” he said. “And Maggie and Beth, even Cherie.” He shook his head at seeing the worry on his face. “It's not what you're fearing. The reason they all looked alike is because they share the same kind of light. The lady behind the white wall knows Maggie and Beth from both abductions. She was around when both happened. She tried to help me but couldn't without giving herself away.”

“Beth was the last picture. And then she suddenly came visit. I knew it couldn't be a coincidence. Then she covered my hand, the one holding yours and it was clear to me why she was there. *She* had the power to bring you back, to call you back.”

“I heard her,” Ruckus whispered, still amazed. “When she screamed...”

Samuel nodded a lot. “Felt like an atomic bomb.”

“I knew something was different with her,” Ruckus said. “I’ve never felt any power that strong.”

“And doesn’t even realize she has it.”

“The night I found her, I was hunting miles away and something lured me there. It was her. She was calling for help and I was led straight to her. Same thing happened the second time.”

“This girl’s got serious angels around her,” Samuel marveled, getting his adamant agreement.

“Definitely not devils. But then so do you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You weren’t the only one holding on to me. Cherie was too. I saw the power threads going from her to you to me. Like a web.”

“She never left my side except to feed me.”

Ruckus remembered. “There was also somebody especially powerful that I couldn’t see, always just behind me. They had hold of my mind, somehow covering it and helping me hide.”

His son let out a breath and whispered, “That was *Gracie*.”

Ruckus stared at him, dumbfounded as he considered that seeming impossibility. “That’s why she isn’t fazed with my darkness.”

“Has to be. I’ve wondered the same. What hides their gifts from us, I wonder?” his son puzzled.

“Whoever is guiding them knows it must be hidden for a reason,” Ruckus was sure.

His son eyed him. “What else did you see?”

The question brought a cold blood-lust that watered his tongue. “I saw him. Lazarus. I know where he is. I know how

to reach him. But he's not alone. We need to strike him while his forces are scattered."

"What forces?"

"I saw thirteen of them. Very powerful. Not sure who they are or where they're from, but they're here in this swamp. But we defeated them." He gripped his son's shoulder. "You needed an army, and you have one. Though we're few, together we're more powerful. We need to make damn sure our little angels are hidden and protected."

CHAPTER FIVE

Cat was dangling by a burning thread, waiting for his first question. Her body was doing shameful things she'd never imagined capable. And she was being brassy with him, but she had no choice. Her mind interpreted him as some kind of threat in a corner which always gave her a crazy fearlessness. And thank the lord, because becoming an embarrassing virgin puddle on the floor was *not* what she wanted to be around him.

“Would you like another orgasm before we begin?”

Her mouth hung open and she was stuck in his gaze, breathless.

“Seems you need more practice with those.”

This snapped her out of her stupidity. “Did I...do it wrong?”

A laugh escaped him, and he eyed her, grinning. “Not at all. But you've only had one.”

Was there a number you were supposed to have before you were...ready for the next whatever? “How many uh...is required?”

Great she was being stupid judging by his chuckles and lowered head.

“Well, I *told* you I don't know anything,” she accused, fighting her shame.

“I'm sorry, I don't mean to laugh at you. I just find your...inexperience a lot of fun.”

Not helpful. She crossed her arms over her chest, pressing her lips together while doing that brave eyeballing thing at him. “Since you’re not gonna ask me a question, maybe you can answer some of mine.”

He stared at her, his eyes moving to her chest then lower, sending her heart between her legs.

“What about *your* orgasm?”

His hot eyes meandered their way back to hers, making her dizzy. “What about it?”

“Well...you’ve been celibate,” she pointed out. “For how long?”

“Over fifteen years.”

She gestured at him, even looked at his delicious tanned, silky skin all the way to the waistband of his black slacks. “I mean...does it still work, even?” Heat erupted in her cheeks at his big, sexy laugh. “You know what, that’s rude,” she muttered.

“God, I’m sorry,” he swore, suddenly standing before her chair, forcing her to look up at him.

Her gaze fell to his hands, unbuttoning his pants. “What...are you doing?”

“Showing you.”

“Showing me...what?” she gasped, eyes locked on his tight black underwear and the mountain beneath.

He lowered the front of his underwear and his massive cock seemed to bounce out, pointing *right* at her. Oh. God.

“Does it look like it works to you?”

She couldn’t move an inch as she stared, the shiny drop on the tip a focal point of terror and fascination.

“Would you like to touch it?”

Her breaths escaped in erratic bursts.

“It *is* yours,” he reasoned, his words licking between her legs.

“I...”

He held his hand out next to his penis and without thinking, she put hers in it, eyes mesmerized with the thick vein running along the length. And the *size*, it was...long and so...*huge*. He pulled her hand to his penis, and she panicked, pulling in reverse.

He covered it with his underwear again and sat before she had any time to process anything. Namely how *childish* she’d acted. Pulling her hand back like he was forcing her to *molest* him. “I...”

“You’re not ready for that yet.”

“I...I am,” she argued in a frail whisper, earning his angled head and studious eyes on her.

“You just need more practice.” His gaze took a hot stroll over her while he sat with his sexy legs open. “You wore the red panties?”

She was back to erratic breathing with that one. She managed a nod.

“Let me see.”

Oh no.

His eyes moved up to her face and she closed hers, unable to see him.

“Can I...ask you something? First?”

“Of course you can.”

His tone was gentle and easy while a hurricane of fear screamed in her head. “What...did you think of...” Oh God, of what? Her hair down there? She wasn’t about to let those words come out of her mouth. But how to ask!? Maybe she should tell him what she got from Big G. “I...told you that I learned how to...get Big G to...tell me things.”

“And?”

The testing, accusing tone didn't help at all.

“Well, I...asked him what...*some* men liked in women.” She wet her lips, unable to move her eyes from her lap. She was in the worst kind of corner she'd ever been in but there was *no* courage or backbone there to help her.

“And?”

Oh God, he was mad now.

Hurry and tell him before you ruin everything!

“What did he say?”

Shit, he was very mad.

“A lot of things but...one thing stood out. About...”

“Tell me.”

His hard tone brought it in a gasp. “Shaving!”

She kept her eyes clenched tight, waiting.

“Shaving...”

“The...privates!” The childish sound of her voice mortified her. Childish just like her bald vagina.

“You shaved,” he repeated, like he couldn't believe his ears.

She covered her face with both hands. “Yes! I shaved! I shaved my *privates!* Oh God,” she croaked. “I should have asked before doing something so stupid.”

“Let me see.”

“No! God no! It's...”

“It's fucking *what?*” he asked, his curious astonishment adding a million degrees of shame.

“Hideous!”

The word barely squeaked past her tight throat as tears stung her eyes.

“What exactly did Big G tell you?” he asked, his tone again accusing.

She wiped the tears from her face. “That...some men liked a woman with no hair...down there.”

“And how did you figure *I* was one of those men?”

“I was...just wanting to do something you liked, and you *refuse* to tell me what that is!”

“Show me your pussy.”

The order stole her breath and set a trembling in her limbs.

“Remember what you agreed to? Whatever I wanted to see. When I wanted to see it. In whatever *position* I want to see it. Stand up and take off the dress. Leave the panties.”

“Please!” she gasped, looking at him.

He stared at her and suddenly stood, making her pulse boom in her ears. He leaned down, putting his mouth by her ear. “You want to compromise?”

Compromise? She nodded without even knowing what she was compromising.

“You’ll let me feel it,” he said in her ear. “Right now. Before I change my mind.”

She gasped and opened her knees at that threat. Anything to avoid his eyes on that mess.

His hand moved between her legs and found the shame behind the lace. He stroked his fingers, his breaths hot at her ear. “Relax,” he ordered. “Lay back for me.”

Her spine was like a creaky hinge as she obeyed him till her back was against the chair. She gripped the edges, her breaths getting sharp at feeling him at the top of her panties. Oh God, he was going in!

He stroked slowly over her naked mound, then lower, feeling and pressing. “Why did you do this?” he asked, his

voice unsteady. “You wanted to get my cock so fucking hard? Make me fucking *crazy* for you? Is that it?”

She gasped as his huge finger worked its way inside her.

“I’m going to eat your naked pussy. That’s what you wanted? You want my tongue where my finger is? Fucking answer me.”

“Yes,” she gasped.

“And *right fucking* here?” His thumb swirled over her clit as he touched everything deep inside her. “You want my tongue on this hard fucking clit?”

“Ethan,” she gasped.

“You want that?”

“Yes!”

“Show me how much you want it. Oh yeah,” he shuddered in her ear. “Open those fucking legs nice and wide for me.”

She pulled her knees open and back, moans and gasps non-stop.

“Show me how fucking bad you want it.”

“Ethan, oh!”

“You’re coming on my finger?” he growled right in her ear, bringing an explosion inside her.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!”

He grabbed the back of her hair and pulled, sending sparks of pain and fear flying as he filled her ear with the hottest groans and gasps, shoving his finger hard to the very bottom of her. She couldn’t open wide enough as wave after wave of pleasure had its endless way.

He pulled his hand out of her with his biggest growl yet and the absence of that fullness brought her cry even as she fought her way back from cloud nine.

She finally opened her eyes to an empty kitchen. She looked around, lowering her dress. Where did he go?

Her mind re-played all the angry things he said to her. She sagged in the chair, fighting to catch her breath while her head spun with confusion. When he wasn't laughing at her, he was angry. She was so stupid to think she could do this. That she was suitable material. She was a childish *embarrassment*. His mean words returned to her, and she gasped at realizing. He talked to her like...she was...a *putan*. Because she was acting like one. Because she knew nothing and he refused to tell her what *he* liked!

Ethan paced in his office so fucking aroused he was ready to kill something. "Big G."

"Yes?"

"What..." He grit his teeth, fighting for control. "Tell me what you told Cat about shaving."

He listened to him repeat it, word for word.

"Did you *not* know she was playing you for answers?"

"I did not know this."

"That's exactly what she was doing. AL," he called next.

"Yes?" he answered, innocently.

"Did you have anything to do with this?"

"Nope," he said, sounding proud. "Did you like it?"

His cock jerked at the question. "She's driving me crazy too quickly. Every scenario I imagine with her *never* happens. Something else does, something...like *that*."

"Your levels indicate—"

“Don’t fucking tell me what my levels indicate, AL. I know what you’re doing.”

“As you wish.”

He continued pacing, the feel of her pussy on his fingers raping his mind. He now *needed* to see those plump naked lips wrapping his cock. Slowly. Inch by inch. He recalled her fear from a gentle hair pulling. What would she be when he forced her to take his cock because that’s where he was in his head.

“Perhaps she might benefit from accidental training in the Dungeon when you’re not around?” AL suggested.

Ethan grabbed his cock when an orgasm surged at those *fucking* words. He stood there, breathing in the flames.

“She *can’t* fucking know about that, not for a *long* time.”

“I can train her for you,” AL offered, burning him. “You know I’m very good at what I do. I had the best teacher. I can call it...classes.”

Fuck. Classes. They had classes. That was it. He’d forgotten he had it all worked out. Then *she* kept happening to all his careful plans.

“If she wants to please you,” Big G said.

“I can’t,” he grit. “I’ll lose my mind on her, I can already tell. She’s...*so* much more than I imagined.”

“Well...you might want to check on her.”

Ethan snapped his head to his monitors. Panic flooded him at seeing her at the boat. “Fuck.”

He tore out of the house, making it to the boat as she was trying to start it without the key.

“Cat.”

“I want to go home. Take me home.”

“Come back inside.”

“No!” she yelled, aiming her tear-streaked face at him.
“I want...to go home!”

“There’s a hurricane.”

“Then I’ll go to my brothers!”

“I’ll take you tomorrow.”

She shook her head, wiping her tears. “I want to go now,” she insisted. “I’m done playing this...stupid guessing game with you while I’m the one dying in shame from guessing wrong.”

Fuck. Fuck. “Don’t go. Let’s talk.”

“About what? What *I* want?”

“No, about what *I* want.”

She crossed her arms, looking away from him. “Why don’t you just...find somebody who knows what the hell they’re doing?”

Those words stirred up vile memories and he hurried and put a lid on them. “I told you... I wouldn’t have you any other way. I like you just like you are.”

“Well, I don’t!”

“I said I would teach you.”

“Then teach me!” she yelled.

“I will not rush,” he said, louder than he meant. “Why are you pushing me?” He stared at her tears, wanting to kill that he’d caused them. “I picked you because we’re a lot alike. You said you didn’t need a man, you didn’t want one. And I believe that still, you can take care of yourself.”

She kept her face down, hugging herself. “You’re right,” she barely said. “I didn’t lie when I said all that, I just didn’t know.”

“What didn’t you know?”

“You,” she said, the ache in her voice killing him while she looked at him with those sparkling eyes. “Turns out I

never needed a man till I met you. I mean...I knew it would be a challenge because look at you.”

Look at him he wondered, confused? “What about me?”

She angled her head like he was playing stupid. “Ethan, you’re more beautiful than any woman I know and you’re a heck of a lot more beautiful than me. And I have done some pretty difficult things in my life,” she assured, “and I figured this would just be another challenge, nothing I couldn’t handle.”

God, what did her words mean to her? Asking seemed to only piss her off but he really needed to know if he was going to fix anything.

“I thought I could just...have... biology with you and figure out the rest later, but I was wrong, and I realize that’s on me. You never offered more than biology, I know that. And... you know what?” She looked at him and he held his breath, praying the next thing out of her mouth would clarify things. “I think I needed this, I feel a lot better getting all this off my chest.” She stuck her hand out like she wanted a shake. “Can we start over and pretend like I didn’t have a meltdown over this? As usual, I’ve embarrassed myself with all this... inexperience. Won’t happen again.”

Wow, fuck. The million things needing to be understood sat there. The questions needing asked and answered so he could make sure this didn’t happen ever again. *There will be time.* He considered that, glancing around as a tug-of-war broke out in his body. He regarded her hand, sure of at least one thing. This would not end in a handshake. It was fucking more, and he wanted her to at least know that. “I never sealed our deal.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I owe you a kiss.”

He stared at her, seeing he’d said something wrong. Again.

“You look a-here,” she said carefully, her fierce side returning till she shook with whatever deadly defect he’d just managed. “If there is anything... on God’s green earth that I will never ever take as a payment from you, it is a God. Damn. *Kiss*.” Her eyes clenched shut. “Christ almighty, you done turned me into a sinner,” she muttered, shooting off down the pier toward the house.

Ethan stood there, watching her. His dumbfounded shock was one for the books. In all his complex calculations, he somehow managed to predict exactly the wrong things, every time with her.

He made his way back, unable to deny the relief that she wasn’t leaving. But he also knew this bump in the road was far from resolved. The next thing out of his mouth would no doubt be a fatal flaw because that’s how everything was turning out with her. She was off-the-charts pissed about the kiss they’d agreed to for a contract signing. Did she want sex instead now? How would he ever find that out without hanging himself?

Back inside, he gave her space and went to his office. He looked at his phone as he paced, wanting to call Eveque. But he really couldn’t take how fucking funny he’d no doubt find all of this. Wasn’t like he didn’t know there would be bumps in the road, he did know that. He was always creating the path of least resistance, that’s all. And that plan had not changed. He just needed to navigate this.

Fuck it. He found his number and dialed it, back to pacing.

“T-Bit,” Eveque answered, his tone already knowing somehow.

“I could stand having a conversation without being laughed at right now. Do you think you can manage or do I need to call back later?”

“I will do my *very* best for you, mon frier,” he offered.

8-Bit took it, having no choice. He paced a couple steps, his brain in a system freeze. He took a breath and closed his eyes, going for a full reboot.

“Take your time.”

“I’m trying to formulate.”

“Oui,” he said, all knowing. “Allow me to give you a shortcut. There *is* no formula.”

He still refused to believe that but didn’t want to argue. “We had an arrangement, right?”

“Oui.”

“We *both* agreed.”

“Oui.”

“We *still*...both agree.”

“Very good.”

“She’s...she’s having a little trouble.”

“She’s moving too fast,” he said.

“Yes!”

“And you need it to go slow.”

“*We* need it to go slow.”

“Remind me, *mon frier*, what we are going slow with again?”

“Everything.”

“Ahhh, that’s very broad,” he said, indicating his entire problem. “She will need clear exacts. Women seem to categorize things differently. Like... to us, sex may mean fucking, but to her, it’s everything else that goes with it.”

Excitement filled him at these insights. “What exactly is everything else?”

“Well, if she *really* likes you, then everything you think, do, and say—regardless of if you think you said it or did

it—is all part of fucking. A man tends to partition these things and a woman cannot seem to separate them. And whatever you do, do not make the mistake of thinking you can avoid this mess by not saying or doing anything, no, no, no,” he warned lightly. “Everything you don’t say and don’t do *will* count against you in a woman’s court of law. The only justice you will ever find is in her mercy.”

Unbelievable.

“But I have good news.”

He froze, waiting.

“You want to hear it?”

“Eveque, if my ears open any more, my fucking brain might fall out.”

“Oui,” he said, laughter threatening. “Fucking fixes everything. Like a factory reset.”

“Which fucking? My kind or hers?”

“Definitely your kind. It takes practice but you will learn how to do all of it, and it will even look seamless.”

Ethan wasn’t happy with this, nor was he convinced it was correct with every woman and every man. “You’re saying I need to learn how to juggle balls and fuck at the same time.”

“Oui.”

“Oui,” he repeated, hating the word.

“My suggestion is finding somebody she can talk to. On top of all the mess we accidentally create when fixing things, we’re also a disease that disables their ability to think straight.”

“Well, that’s becoming a two-way street,” he assured.

“Don’t allow her to change the facts.”

“Which are?”

“You want her more than you’ve ever wanted anything. Oui?”

He slid his hand over his forehead. “Yes,” he admitted.

“And she is in the same boat?”

“I...yes. I *think*,” he added, sure of *nothing* now.

“Go with your male gut on that one, mon frier. She wants to fuck?”

“God...yes, she begs for it without words.”

“Well, that will change.”

“How?” he wondered, hope and dread clashing.

“She will begin using very precise words. And tactics you will not be able to resist.”

“Like what?” he wondered, disturbed at this news.

“Like *force*. And if you’re able to resist her when she resorts to this deadly tactic, let me know so we can put it in our survival manual.”

“I gave her two orgasms!”

“Ohhhhh, mon frier,” he said, like he’d committed a fatal mistake. “This is not seen by a woman the way it is seen by a man.”

“Total shock.”

“A woman expresses love by giving *you* pleasure. Have you let her do that yet?”

“No!”

“Because you will lose your mind, I get it. But this is seen as the greatest rejection.”

“Me not letting her give *me* pleasure?”

“Oui,” he said like it was both obvious and true. And while Ethan knew it was true in their case, it was hardly an obvious truth. “She sees that as you not wanting her love or her love not being good enough.”

“And then, mistake of *all* mistakes, I suggested we seal our marriage agreement with a kiss—like we agreed to before.

I thought I needed to show her I was serious about our arrangement still and—” Ethan stopped at Bishops moan of doom. “What?!”

“First you offer this kiss like some kind of *deal* then again after a *fight*?”

“They kiss at the end of a marriage ceremony!” he cried quietly in his defense.

“Mon Dieu, that kiss is symbolic, T-Bit. The crowning of a sacred union. To use it as a handshake in a deal or band-aid after a fight is the greatest insult.”

He had to laugh. “She wanted a handshake,” he said.

“It would have been a *lot* more appropriate.”

“No shit. She thought I was *paying* her with it, but I was trying to show her what she means to me, that she means a *marriage* to me, a lifelong commitment, the whole package!”

“Oui.”

Ethan mentally shoved off his pity, fucking pissed. In general.

“I have more good news.”

“What,” he muttered. “I’m fucking exhausted.”

“If she loves you, she will be very good at forgiving. You just have to find a way to make her understand what’s in your heart.”

“How? All I got are algorithms then error messages all over the place.”

“There is one language that does not need words. And you have no reason not to use it.”

He closed his eyes, already knowing. “I can’t.”

“You can. You’re stronger than your past. You’re the leader of the Tech Hatch, the fucking best. And my favorite,” he added, the tacked on stupidity bringing a shot of laughter.

“You laugh,” he said, offended. “You will always be my T-Bit, oui?”

Ethan nodded. “Always. Would you like a kiss? I’m giving them out in all the wrong ways and for all the wrong reasons.” Ethan nodded at his laughter. “Maybe you can start a comic in the Nouvelles. Or a metaphorical obituary. Today, another Twelve succumbed to the error of his wondrous stupidity. Beat and buried alive by his wife. Survived by nobody because he’s too stupid to have family.”

A full minute later, Bishop managed, “What you need is a real mess. Like a Hurricane in two days to take your mind off it. You okay on that front?”

“Yes,” he sighed. “The Hurricane Hack squad is on auto-pilot. Updated yesterday.”

“Very good. Your Hurricane Hacks were always the best.”

“Not sure about that,” he said, wondering what Cat was doing.

“You’ve been ranked #1 for two seasons straight,” he cried.

The odd information scrambled his brain. “Number one in what?”

“The Hurricane Huster List in the Nouvelle! You did not know of this?”

“I don’t *read* the Nouvelle’s, I submit data to it.”

“Meh, maybe that’s your problem.”

“What? What else is my problem? Pile it on.”

“You need to take a break from the data and experience life in another format. And hey...how about *that’s an order*. See to it immediately. And report to me after. In a conversation over Kool-aid, not a spreadsheet, oui?”

He was fucking dead serious. “Oui,” he said.

“Take her on a date.”

“She hunts. And fishes.”

“Then take her fishing and hunting,” he said, like it wasn’t rocket science.

But with Cat, everything was science. She was her own science. And the sooner he learned it, the better the entire fucking world would be.

“Fine. I will. If you find me dead, just know I went down fighting about something that had nothing to do with the reason for my death.”

“Mon Dieu, you fucking kill me,” he said, ending the call on wheezing laughter.

Ethan stood there, contemplating everything. A date. A hunting date? Fishing? It occurred to him in a panic, and he dialed Eveque again. The second he picked up, he wondered, “Why wouldn’t she take my hunting or fishing proposal as an insult too?”

“Because you *won’t* use it like it’s some kind of deal or bandage.”

“So just...”

“You want to go hunting or fishing.”

“But I don’t. At this time.”

“Make it relevant, T-Bit.”

Relevant.

“There’s a Hurricane coming. We can always stand to have a surplus of fresh food, oui? And you’re short-handed due to the prep. If she’s anything like Ma Petite, she loves helping others.”

“Oh, this is her way of *life*.”

“And Bingo was his name.”

Relief began to enter the mix. “Thank you.”

“I’ll take that in fried cat-fish.”

“You got it.”

Ethan hung up. “Big G.”

“Yes, Ethan?”

“Where is Cat?”

“According to the tracking device in her ring, she’s in your room.”

“Can you...find out how she’s doing? Without her knowing I asked you to? I need a read out on her current...”
Fuck, he sounded like a robot. “I need to know how she’s feeling.”

“I will engage Cat in a conversation and gather data that would allow you to sufficiently arrive at that information.”

“Thank you. Can you do that right away?”

“I’ll do it immediately.”

“Big G,” he called at the last second.

“Yes, Ethan?”

“Thank you, brother. For everything.”

“Always my pleasure.”

CHAPTER SIX

Patches opened his eyes, realizing he'd dozed off at his desk. A noise turned his head and he realized it'd woken him. He listened for a span.

There it was again. Was somebody moving *furniture*?

He stood, ready to make one final round and call it a night. He looked at his phone, making sure Tegan from Texas hadn't texted with more questions. At the bottom of the stairs leading to the first floor, he paused. The odd sound came again, and he backtracked two steps, listening. He looked up at what sounded like high winds outside and hurried up the stairs.

Opening the door to darkness and high-pitched howling, he made his way to the main entrance.

Panic hit him at wondering if the hurricane predictions had changed.

He ran to the front door, opening it to deafening screeches. He made his way down the steps and looked up.

Holy shit. Was that...*bats*?

He turned in circles, watching the dark fury as his mind caught up to the alarm screaming in his brain. Oh fuck, *fuck*, Nitro.

Patches shot up the steps then hit a full sprint toward the basement. The stairwell door banged open and he flew down the steps, bouncing off walls as he ran to Nitro's room.

He fought to stifle his breaths at Nitro's door, listening. Oh Jesus. They were having sex. He remembered what happened last time he did that. Or he could just be having sex with his wife.

He rapped his knuckles on the door, his heart thumping. No answer.

“Making my rounds,” he called. “Was just seeing if you guys need anything before I shut everything down for the night.”

“We’re fine,” Nitro answered.

His voice sounded rough, angry. Patches closed his eyes briefly and called, “Felix, you need anything?”

“She’s fine,” Nitro said, his tone anything but.

“I need to check her bite. Won’t take me but a second.”

“Well, you can’t come in right now. I’m fucking her.”

Motherfuck. His sadistic tone brought his pulse to a jackhammer. “Felix, you okay?”

He heard words, but couldn’t make them out.

“I didn’t quite hear you.”

“She said she’s fine!” Nitro barked.

Again, she said something, and Patches realized why he couldn’t understand her. She was fucking gagged, he was sure.

“Alright,” he called. “Just checking. Night.”

Patches raced back to his office and dialed Lesion, glancing down the hall behind him.

“Patches?”

“I think Nitro is hurting Felix,” he whispered. “He has her in his room and I just went check on them. And there’s a million bats flying above the hospital. What do I fucking do?”

“God, no,” he muttered, his breaths turning shallow. “I’m coming.”

“What’s wrong?” a tiny voice said in the background.

“Shhh, go back to sleep, Angel. It’s just Patches. I need to run him some medicine.”

“I need to do something right now if he’s fucking hurting her, tell me what to do.” He hurried to the hall, eying the darkness leading to his room.

“You have any tranquilizers?”

“No, but I have something that’ll knock him on his ass if I can get it in him.”

“Do not get near him.”

“He’s fucking hurting her,” he grit, sure of that. “She sounds gagged, like she couldn’t talk.”

“He *won’t* hurt her.”

“Are you sure?” he shrilled, not at all convinced of that.

“I am. Stay near but do not agitate him. He *will* kill you.”

Patches shoved his phone in his back pocket, eyes returning to that dark hallway. He glanced around the room, spotting his baseball bat on the shelf. He grabbed it and crept to the doorway, sticking his head around the corner leading to the medicine cabinet while the screeches outside grew deafening.

He made it to the cabinet in the next room, constantly looking into the darkness behind him. Fuck, he couldn’t see shit. And turning on the light felt like a bad idea. He opened the cabinet, staring at the row of containers, finally recognizing the one that held the Propofol. He grabbed two pre-filled syringes and shoved them in his back pocket.

Grabbing the bat in both hands, he raised it to head level and made his way back to Nitro’s room. He’d have to go in. That’s all. He couldn’t wait for Lesion if he was hurting her. He’d want that. His rage over what he’d done to Felix was fresh in his head still. All that would be on him if he let him hurt her.

He *will* kill you.

And there was that.

Listening at the door, he was filled with a sick dread at the rough sexual noises. God damn. He shook his head, gripping the bat tighter in one hand as he slowly turned the doorknob. He barely pushed. Didn't budge.

He'd blocked it because there were no locks on the inside of these doors. Patches knocked again, his breaths shallow. "Nitro."

"Do you have a death wish?" Nitro seethed around grunts and bed squeaks. He caught the sound of Felix and his rage lit up at the fear and pain in her moans.

He needed to fucking draw him out. "Open the door," he ordered. "Or I'm busting it fucking down."

"Oh, I fucking dare you," he said around faster bed squeaks and lustier grunts.

"I'm coming in," he warned, grabbing the bat in both hands. He used it like a sledge-hammer, slamming it with all his might at the center of the door.

It flew open and Nitro was on him in a flash, plowing him into the wall. His head slammed the floor and pain split his shoulder as he bit the fuck out of him, bringing a roar of agony as he fought to lock his legs and arms around him.

Nitro jerked his head and ripped the flesh from his body, putting his face just before his with a roar so loud his body shook.

Blood covered his face and the idea it wasn't just his loaded him with more adrenalin. He shoved against the wall of fury on him, roaring back at him before his throat came under the iron grip of his hands. Mother *fuck!*

Patches thrashed beneath him, fighting to get his hands between his wrists when Felix screamed "Niiiiitrooooo!"

Patches connected a foot with the wall and inched enough to get leverage, breaking his death grip on his throat. Lungs burning, he was suddenly airborne, then torpedoed

through the air. His back hit a wall, blasting his wind right out of him. He hit the floor and fought to blink away the black dots from his vision as Felix yanked on Nitro's arm.

He spun and grabbed her face in one hand, filling Patches with terror. Then he kissed her and pushed her aside, heading his way with murder in cold blood on his face.

Patches searched his body, his hand encountering the back pocket with the syringe right as Nitro lifted him like a rag-doll. He struggled to get the cap off as he hit the floor again. And again. And fucking again.

Felix screamed and fought her way between them, covering Patches body. Nitro pulled her off and returned to pummeling his chest with hammer fists as Felix clawed at his face and eyes, trying to stop him.

Patches didn't know when he had, but as he blinked back the dark curtain coming for his mind, he stared at the syringe in his psycho brother's neck.

Nitro reached up and yanked it out, releasing a blood curdling roar at him. He swayed on his feet and dropped to his knees then fell like a tower to the floor.

Patches struggled to move. Fuck, he'd banged him up good. "Felix," he groaned, needing to get her out of there in case he somehow woke back up.

Lesion was suddenly crouched next to him. "Holy God," he muttered. "Felix, can you walk?"

"Yes," she gasped between sobs. "He didn't hurt me bad."

Bad? Fuck, Nitro was going to hang himself.

"I've been trying to get inside," Lesion said. "The bats wouldn't let me. Can you sit up?"

He tugged him upright and Patches grimaced at the wave of pain. Lesion forced something between his lips. "Put it under your tongue. For trauma pain."

Fuck, he sure had that.

Lesion glanced over his shoulder and hurried to Nitro. “I need to get him restrained before he wakes.”

“I’ll help,” Felix whispered while Patches tried to get a look at her while making his way to his feet. He needed to know what Lesion gave him because already he was getting strength he had no right to have given what Nitro had done.

“I got him,” Patches said, getting behind him. “Go get the restraints ready.”

“More than rope,” Felix whispered. “He chewed out of those.”

Holy fuck.

At the room, he lay Nitro on the floor, looking around. “We can secure him to the bed frame with the rope then I’ll go get chain.”

Once he was secure, he straightened, looking at Felix. “Show me where he hurt you.”

She shook her head and her face crimped up with a sob as she began showing him. God, he was going to be sick. Eight bites.

“He’s going to fucking shoot himself for this,” Patches swore quietly to Lesion.

Felix let out a sob, covering her mouth.

“We won’t let that happen,” Lesion assured her. “Patches, go get the chain while I give her something for pain.”

“You think we should bring ice or is this Kool-aid cold enough like it is?” Cat wondered, looking over her shoulder at

an edible Ethan in blue jeans and white t-shirt. Cooking their meals so they could just fish and not work.

“Ice won’t hurt.”

“You sure I can’t do any of the cooking?”

“I like cooking for you.”

“I might like cooking for you if you gave me a chance.”

“What if I let you feed me?”

She giggled at the idea. “I’ll take it.”

“Seriously?” he said, maybe happy about it. She was never sure what he was.

“As a heart-attack. No take backs.”

“I guess I can feed you dessert to make it fair.”

“You’re already cooking,” she laughed, remembering to be mature. No more non-stop jokes, incessant teasing, and obnoxiously loud laughing. She learned through Big G that he preferred mature women. Which she had *not* been. She really never had reason to be, was always her and Jason. Which reminded her. “I talked to Jason and Zack. They seem to be having a good time getting ready for the hurricane,” she said dryly. “Who’s Aunt Cat? Nobody needs her.”

“I need her,” he said lightly, making her heart skitter with hope. She wanted that to be true so much. “Are they hard for him?”

“The hurricanes?” she wondered.

“Yeah. After what happened, I’d imagine it’s rough.”

“He’s good at hiding his true feelings around me and Jason.” She felt like Ethan was a lot like him. The farther down you shoved a thing the better off you were. “I think it’s sweet that you’re fishing for your Hatch,” she said, smiling.

“Well...it’s my job.”

“But it ain’t mandatory,” she countered.

“It is if I want to be a good leader.”

He appeared over her shoulder, and she glanced up at him, her pulse scattering. “What?”

His brows drew together, and he leaned. “What is that smell on you?”

“Why? I used whatever soap there was to find in the bathroom.”

“It’s in the dispenser. The one I showed you?”

“Well, I...forgot how to work it so I found something old fashioned.” She panicked. “It *looked* like a bar of soap?”

“Was it in a Ziplock bag?”

“Oh my lord, yes, why? What!” she cried at his lowered grin.

“That’s a foot balm.”

“A *what*? Is *that* why it didn’t lather?”

“Smells good on you.”

“Well, *I* thought it smelled good too.”

He stroked her shoulder with his finger, sending goosebumps to chase after him. “Soft. Where else did you use it?”

She gasped and sputtered as heat burned her everywhere. “Where...you normally use soap.”

She watched him lower and press a soft kiss on her skin. “Nice,” he said, then straightened and turned.

She let her breath go, realizing she was shaking. *Get a hold of your virgin self, good lord.* She still had to survive an all-day fishing trip with him and acting like she wasn’t over the moon about it was hard enough. She was happy to help with work and especially this kind. So, that was a win. And she loved to fish so that was a win-win. *And* she got to do it with him all day, so make that three wins.

Boy was she *winning* to-day.

Ethan couldn't stop looking at Cat, glad he was driving the boat to their destination. She sat at the front, reminding him of a shooting star in human form. He found himself awed and...peaceful. He decided right then that she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Smiling with that pure, innocent joy. Over a frog, a bird, a butterfly. Aiming that joy at the sun while feeling the wind on her silky skin. If he wanted, he could reach out and touch this miracle. But there was something special about only watching her. There were no cares. No fears. No shadows waiting around the corner making sure you didn't hope for such a thing much less have it. It was enough to stand in that overflow. Even if he never tasted it for himself...he could taste it in her.

He slowed the boat at spotting the area he wanted to take her. He smiled at her wide-eyed gasp on him when he entered the canopy of trees. "Ethan Samuel 8-Bit Johnson," she cried, making him laugh. He refused to tell her his middle name, so she'd been making up her own, always different each time. She even changed his last name which he was more than happy for. There was only one time in all his life that he really liked his last name. Which was an hour before when she'd called herself "Mrs. Ethan Boudreaux."

"Are you sure you're not taking me on a honeymoon, pretending to fish?" she teased as he parked next to the dock.

"Reading my mind again, I see," he said, glad to say the words even if she didn't know how true they were.

Ever since Eveque had said fucking was the universal language that fixed everything, he'd never stopped thinking of when he might apply that fix. He couldn't begin to see himself initiating it, but he thought he could finish anything she started. And he was sure he could figure a way to help her start it.

He'd brought a tent. She asked why. In case you want to get out of the heat. Clearly lame in the cool month of October. He finally threw his pride to the wolves and admitted it was his first time taking a woman anywhere for anything like that. She thankfully didn't take it wrong, and he was reinstated into manhood with his balls intact and a pretty smile on her face. Fuck, he needed to find an algorithm for producing more of those. He'd happily serve up his balls on a platter every day just to be responsible for bringing them. That was an addiction begging to happen.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cat intended to write Jesus a thank you note for the day so far. She couldn't stop smiling, mostly because of how Ethan was being so different. His non-stop flirting and compliments kept her with a permanent blush.

"Number ten!" she called, yanking her pole, and reeling in with a laugh at his muttered fish insults while knowing he wasn't really offended.

"There goes the rest of my manhood. I think they're smelling that foot balm and can't resist."

She laughed gasping. "He's big! Come help me!"

He set his pole down and hurried over, getting the net.

"It's a *huge* sun perch! Oh, he's beautiful!"

"Got em'," Ethan said, scooping up the floundering beauty and adding him to the large ice chest. "Wow," he said, peering in at their haul.

"We did good," she said, setting her pole down.

"You did good, you caught over half."

"You probably let me win because you're so sweet," she accused, loving when he laughed a big *real* laugh.

"Yes, I have all the fish tagged and speak to them through my phone app."

"I bet you would probably make one just to be nice to me."

He gave one of his slow, muscle-melting grins. "Is my obsession that obvious?"

Oh God, she loved him flirty. Every time he made her laugh, it put this amazing smile on his face, and she was becoming addicted to the exchange.

“I’m hungry!” she announced. “And ready for a break.”

“Mon Dieu, there is a God.”

“You’re hungry?” she cried. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“And miss out getting my fishing pride crushed by you?”

She hurried to their camp area before he tried to hog all the work. “Since I’m the amazing fisher, I’ll fix the food.”

“And you have to feed me,” he reminded.

“Yes,” she said, smiling and thrilled about that. To be able to stare at his mouth was all the payment. He had the sexiest mouth on the planet.

“And I get to feed you dessert,” he said, adding wood to their little fire.

“Fine,” she sighed, as she uncovered the dishes and loaded a plate with food. “You can spoon feed me hot chocolate.”

“Mmm,” he said, making her tummy flip at the sexual sound.

God, she knew something was coming. It had been building up all day and it was closer than ever. “I’m not a sexy eater,” she said, digging for more of his compliments.

He chuckled and she aimed her grin over her shoulder. “Well, your mouth is entirely unaware that it has raunchy sex with its food.”

Oh God, her rule for not laughing obnoxiously loud had long been out the window. But he seemed to love them so no regret. She went next to him and set the plate of food down and opened up a napkin, tucking it in his shirt.

“You plan to make a mess?”

She gave a giggle. “I know how to feed. The question is, do you know how to be fed.”

“I see. Well, hurry, I’m starving.”

She grinned for the first five bites, reaching out and wiping food from the corner of his mouth. Without warning, he leaned and sucked her finger, stealing her breath and brain cells. Oh mercy. His tongue was a show by itself. *You want me to lick you right here.*

She set the fork on the plate, and it toppled right out. “Shit,” she whispered, glancing at him and catching his sexy grin. “That’s your fault.”

“You don’t like getting your finger sucked?”

All her brain heard was suck and finger and getting it. “I’m not used to it. Never said I didn’t like it.”

“Eat while I make your dessert.”

“I sure will,” she said, hungry after smelling his food. He was an amazing cook. “Did you take culinary classes or something?” she wondered, watching him heat water at the fire while she let her mouth have raunchy sex with her meal.

“Self-taught mostly. And an amazing app.”

She nodded, shoveling another forkful into the sexpot. “All my recipes are scribbled. On these little...index cards,” she said around a mouthful, gathering the last of it onto her fork. “Mmm. One more bite for the raunch factory.” She devoured the entire thing in one go, grinning at his gorgeous laugh.

He turned, presenting his backside then removed his shirt. The sight of his tattooed, tan muscles stole all her smiles and dang near her food from her stomach. His pants suddenly went down next, and she swallowed down the food creeping back up her throat.

“Gonna wash all this fish-fun off me.” He made his way to their supplies and pulled out that water tank with the hose she’d seen and wondered over. That was a *shower*?

“Well...ain’t you fancy,” she muttered, her gaze devouring his near naked body.

She snuck peeks at him while he showered in his underwear, the size of his bulge indicating he was aroused. Probably as much as she was. Would he make a move or what? She did *not* look forward to those logistics after all the embarrassing half-assed ones. Half because it was only ever her and never him. The why of that was gradually changing in her mind, especially after spending the day getting to know him. He was the sweetest man under his scary exterior. Was it possible he was...nervous? Lord, he didn’t act nervous when he did the things he had. What if he was nervous for the other way around? Her doing something to him? She considered his past and those addictions. She wished she knew more about that to know which direction to go or not go. She didn’t want to say or do anything to cause him any kind of...triggers.

But how to find that out without pressing random buttons? She remembered the marriage classes the Belle Eveque was requiring. Thank the lord for that angel. But that didn’t help her now. She glanced at him, rinsing his hair, her lust at full throttle wishing she was the water licking down his body like a whore on a hotdog.

She snapped her eyes forward when he turned, not wanting to get caught drooling. She realized he was done and smoothed her hands on the blanket, aiming an innocent smile at him as he dropped next to her. Dripping with water. And sex. Jesus, she wanted *him* for dessert, not stupid chocolate.

“There’s enough for you if you want to rinse off.”

Her panic hit her. “I...uh...”

“I know how not to look.” He angled his gaze at her. “Unlike you.”

Her jaw dropped and she smacked his shoulder, only for her hands to drag along the wet muscle. “You’re...still wet.” She snatched it back and looked at the fire.

He liked looking at her, she remembered. She wanted to ask if he wanted her to shower. Was there a reason he wanted her clean? *I’m going to eat this pussy.* Ooookay, that was somewhere on the sex horizon because she had no doubt he intended to do it. And lord, she wanted it. But...dammit! *Damn her bald vagina!*

“You don’t have to,” he said, grinning.

“I was...considering. I showered before coming. Right before. I didn’t really get that dirty, I’m a...pretty clean fisher. I’ll wash my hands though.”

He got up and started doing something. The chocolate, she realized, once her gaze made it past his rippling muscles, again wondering how she was going to get her hands on those without making everything weird. Some way to hide the sexual side of it. Or mask it. They’d been playing around that fire all day like two teenagers playing strip poker. Oh shit. No, they didn’t have cards. Spin the bottle? No, that was all sex.

She needed something...

Truth or Dare!

He returned to the blanket with her cup and sat, stirring it. “Ready for dessert?”

“Ohhhh yeah,” she mumbled all weird, wondering how she would even suggest such a thing.

He presented her with a spoonful and she leaned.

“Careful it’s not too hot,” he murmured.

She hesitated, poking her tongue in it then sipping it from the spoon. She barely caught his grin as her eyes lowered over his body, stopping for a terrifying second at his bulging penis in his underwear. She faced the lagoon and cleared her throat. “When my brother and I were young, we’d uh...play a

game called Truth or Dare?” She squinted at him. “Ever hear of it?”

He brought the spoon to her mouth. “I have,” he said softly. He wiped chocolate from her mouth and sucked his finger. “What were you? A dare devil or a truth angel.”

“Truth angel,” she laughed. “But my brother had a rule. After three truths, you had to pick dare. My dad found out he’d dared me to grab a gator’s tail and got so mad he forbid us to play again.”

“Did you?”

“Touch the tail or play again?”

He smiled. “Both.”

She winced. “Yes and... yes.”

“Really,” he muttered, sounding maybe surprised, maybe impressed. Maybe something else.

“Okay, this is way to slow for me.” She took the cup from him and downed the rest of it, cleaning the mess with a single swipe of her tongue.

He stared at her mouth, his expression slowly going serious before raising his gaze to her. “Truth or Dare.”

Oh shit. “You...want to play?”

“Yes.”

“Truth,” she said, fighting to act unfazed by his sudden serious mood.

“Do you like me?”

Her heart pounded. “Yes. I do. Very much,” she added, realizing she’d be asking the same thing. “Truth or Dare.”

He eyed her, his gaze hot, the tip of his tongue sliding slowly. “Truth.”

Oh boy. “Do *you* like *me*?”

He held her gaze real tight. “Yes. I do. *Very* much.”

Oh, *very* much.

“Truth or Dare,” he said.

“Truth.”

He looked right at her now. “If there was never an agreement between us. Would you...still want to be married to me?”

He lost his courage halfway through and lowered his eyes, like he feared that answer. “Absolutely,” she whispered. “And for more than just your body, even.”

She smiled at hearing his beautiful laugh.

“Truth or Dare,” she said, watching his smile fade.

“I’m getting nervous. Truth.”

She realized for him Truth might be riskier than Dares. She considered the question she needed to ask that would help him the most. And her. “Did you know...” she began. “That no matter what is in your past...you can trust me to never hurt you?”

He stared between them and then looked off to the left. “I believe... you think you mean that.”

She stared at him, her hope crumpling a little. “Well...I dare you to tell me about it. So I can prove it to you.”

He shook his head, and she held her breath, praying he’d just do it. “What do you want to know?”

Oh thank you God. “Tell me why you’re afraid of me knowing?” she urged softly.

“Because...I don’t want you anywhere near that. Everything about you demands I protect you from it.” He looked at her and the real fear in his gaze froze her as much as it pained her. “The things I liked...are direct offspring of the evil that once consumed me.”

“When did that start?”

“Sixteen.”

She nodded. “That’s already a rough age for boys. I’m so sorry you were ever hurt. I know I can’t change anything but...you know me and you...we seem to make a pretty amazing team. We could put—” She stopped at his headshaking. “No what?”

“I don’t want anything to do with it.”

“Then we won’t,” she said simply.

“I wish it was that simple.”

“Well...then explain it to me,” she urged.

“It’s waiting. That’s all it’s doing, it’s just fucking waiting. I’ve been celibate and I can already tell that sixteen years is a joke to it. One taste. One step. One inch, that’s all it needs. I know because I already want it more than anything. And when it takes me, Cat, I can’t...” He closed his eyes. “It controls me.”

She was shaking her head. “I won’t let that happen.”

He hit her with angry eyes. “You can’t stop it.”

“Ethan...you’ve never had a partner to help you fight in the right way. I don’t know what this woman you were with did, but I can tell you if she was involved in that, she was bad news and you can thank God he got her out of your life. Look who you are now. You did that. But you didn’t do it alone, people that loved you were there to help you. Let me help you.”

He scrubbed his face and angled it away from her. “I know you’re right. About everything you just said. I know I have to try. There have been plenty of offers. But there has never been anybody who I would ever trust for something like this.” He turned his face toward her now. “But you...I know. I know I can trust you.”

Oh mercy. She wiped her tears, desperate to touch him. “Sorry,” she whispered. “That means a lot to me.”

She chanced a look at him, finding his eyes on her.

“I’m a masochist.”

She stared at him, her brain shooting off in every direction to find the meaning of that. “Alright. Remind me...”

“I like pain,” he said, still looking right at her. “With sex.”

The words sounded winded, and she realized he was affected by his own confession. “Okay. Take your time,” she whispered. “We have all of it we need. Can you tell me how that works?”

“Somebody...gives both. The pain and the sex.”

“Okay, and there. You said it. I know there’s a lot more to say but let’s take a moment to recognize you’ve done the hardest thing ever. You opened that door, and you took that first step.”

His breaths thickened as he angled his head away from her. “I’ve never wanted to kiss a woman the way I want to kiss you.”

Oh Jesus, help them, because he surely meant in that second. “I trust you, Ethan. If you want to try and kiss me... I’m happy to help you with that.”

“What if I can’t stop?”

“Then...let’s talk about the worst-case scenario. How about that?”

“I’ll want it and not stop till I get it. I will find a way to get it,” he said, looking at her now.

What did that mean exactly. “Can you give me an example? You’re talking about force?”

“Not you, no,” he swore. “I would return there.”

Her stomach knotted.

“Return where, honey?”

“To the Dungeon. Where I can have anything and everything I want whenever I want it.”

What on earth dungeon was this? “Is this a real place or...”

“It’s very real.”

Oh God.

“Here? In the swamp?”

“Yes.”

At seeing his fear, she covered his arm with her hand and squeezed. “Look at me.”

He did. Clung to her gaze. She was suddenly in one hell of a corner with him, only it was not her in danger it was him. And that brought her fight with ferocity.

“You listen to me, Ethan. Are you listening?”

He stared at her, his gaze screaming for help.

“You are not going there. Do you understand? If you need to go someplace to get something, you will come to me. Wherever I am. Whatever time. You will find me, and I will take care of you and all your needs no matter how broken you think they are. Are you hearing me,” she ordered softly.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yes, I hear you.”

His gaze lowered to her mouth and the second she realized he wanted to kiss her but feared, she climbed in his lap and took hold of his face. “I got you.”

His hands held her head and he pulled her mouth to his, kissing her like she’d never dreamed of being kissed before, filling her mouth with his hunger, his agony, his breathtaking buried passions.

Her needs were right behind his, her moans just as desperate. Lord his tongue lashed with a fury along hers and suddenly the ground was at her back and his cock was in her hand.

“Cat,” he croaked, pumping into her grip while filling her mouth with his hot groans.

“I got you, baby,” she answered, her fingers pressing on his butt, digging as she opened her legs. His hand was yanking on her panties as he kissed her, and she lifted her hips, fighting to remove them. “Yes,” she gasped, holding his cock against her opening. Shit he was huge.

“Oh fuck,” he grit, holding himself still while straining out groans. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, or explained.

God he was so sweet. “Make love to me. Oh God, I need you so much.”

She couldn’t pin-point what or how or why, but he went from raging hard to suddenly off of her, sitting on the blanket with his back facing her and his head in his hands.

She sat up and put her arms around him. “Hey, you’re okay.”

“I’m not fucking okay, Cat.”

“Tell me what the problem is.”

“My dick decided to quit working, that’s what happened. Because it doesn’t like soft and sweet, or *love*.”

“Then we don’t use all that.”

“Like fuck will I give you to this monster! That’s what it wants, it wants you! It wants to twist your soul into something you’ll never recognize and I will never let that happen!”

He was pacing, and God he was devastating to look at, so beautiful, broken, and furious because of it.

She got up and ran to him, bear hugging him from behind with all her might. He turned and his arms went around her, hugging back with a desperation that made her cry. “Don’t run from me, Ethan. Don’t run from us.” She looked up. “We don’t give up. Tell me you won’t give up. Please.”

His mouth crashed down on hers, capturing her jaw in his strong hand. “I won’t, I won’t, don’t cry Ma Menou. I won’t give up on us. I *swear* it.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Seer's eyes opened and he sat up, looking around at the trees all around. He'd taken a walk to clear his head then sat a spell and dozed. Something woke him. He pulled his phone out and looked at his messages.

Eveque: *Don't forget about 8-Bit as soon as you can.*

Shit. *And* the brother he was supposed to go see. He found 8-Bit's number and pressed it, making his way to his feet, aching from the past days of non-stop spiritual warfare. He made his way back to his place, ready to touch and feel Cherie.

"Seer."

Samuel paused at hearing 8-Bit's voice as his gifts updated him on his past troubles. "It's been a while. I hear you need me to come and see something. Was hoping to do that now if we can. I have a war needing waging sooner rather than later."

"Anything I can help with?"

His eagerness was a good sign. He'd need that fight for what he sensed in him. "I have what I need at this time. But I'll surely let you know if your technological genius becomes necessary."

"Glad everything worked out with your father."

Seer paused at the tug in his spirit. "When can we meet? Bring your girl with you. I need to see her too."

"She was planning on coming."

"Good. You wanna rendezvous at the Basilique?"

“Sounds good. See you in an hour?”

He nodded. “That you will.”

He stared at his phone after hanging up then glanced around at the peaceful façade hiding the dark cloud encroaching their entire swamp.

He hurried back spotting Cherie on the porch, sweeping with a warrior’s vigor, determined to purify and protect their sanctuary however she could. She’d felt helpless while he sat with his father, he knew. But after learning she was one of his spirit warriors, he was thrilled to have her as his right hand in his Spirit Hatch. He’d prayed for more people, and they’d been standing right among them the entire time. Made him wonder who else they had hiding in plain sight.

The second her gaze found him, she paused, and he lit up like a power plant. He’d worried his flesh would weaken his spirit, but the opposite seemed to happen with her, and God was he grateful since he couldn’t deny the hungers she set anytime he laid eyes on her. She was literal food in so many ways and that he could feast to his heart’s content without jeopardizing anything was the greatest gift.

His need flared when she dropped her broom and hurried to meet him. She ran the last few feet and caught him in a tight hug. “Ma Cherie,” he gushed, hugging her back tight and petting her. “You okay?”

“I’m just worried about you,” she wept in his chest. “All I can do is clean and pray and feel useless.”

He took her face and held it tight. “Let your husband help with that.” He devoured her mouth, bringing those sounds he’d been craving to hear. He moved along her jaw, then neck. “I have you,” he whispered, sucking with a lustful intent that lit her up.

By the time they made it inside, a frantic clothing war broke out, their ragged, hot breaths communicating what was coming. He fell with her on the bed, hiking her leg up as he did. He entered her and her sharp cry brought a hurricane of

desire that crushed their need. She called for her own devastation with non-stop “*fuck me, fuck me*” and he answered with a brutal passion. Her screams of pleasure crashed into his spirit, and he absorbed all of it, feeling it form an impenetrable shield in them. Fuck, his life of celibacy had hidden this powerful dynamic from him but now that he knew, he would without a doubt utilize every glorious bit of that gift.

Seer spent fifteen minutes kissing her forehead as the remnants of what passed between them dwindled to labored breaths filled with moans of awe and contentment.

“You have to go, don’t you,” she murmured.

He stroked his fingers along her hair line. “I do.”

“And I have to stay here.”

Hearing the sadness in her tone, he said, “I need to tell you something.”

She lifted up, staring down in his face, worry lining her caramel brow.

“When I spoke to Mon Piere, he said I wasn’t alone in preventing the darkness from taking him. He said there was a web of light between you and me. You were my strength, Cherie while I fought. So...do not think you are useless ever again.” He angled his head at her, loving the look of devotion on her face. “Will you serve as my right hand in the Spirit Hatch?”

Tears fell and she nodded, pressing kisses on his mouth around gasps. “Are you stupid? Of *course* I’m yours however you need me.”

He grinned and pulled her on top of him, watching desire melt her face at feeling his arousal again.

She raised up, sitting her perfect ass on his erection. “Let *me* fuck *you* now.”

His smile burned up in the instant inferno her words created. He looked between them, watching her rise up and guide him to heaven’s door. Then she shoved them both

through in a sudden drop that brought his fingers digging with a blast of desire. He helped her fuck him as hard and fast as she wanted, his growls building with every plunge she took. “Fuck,” he gasped, staring at his cock moving in and out of her. “Oh fuck, Cherie,” he said, jerking her harder and meeting every descent with a vicious buck of his hips. The assault was magnificent, her shrieks bursting with every slam of his dick.

His orgasm came, otherworldly and powerful. He knew this was how they’d always prepare for war from that point on. What she created... no, what *they* created felt like diving into a pool of immeasurable power and light and he needed every drop of that. It was a truly holy fuck, and he’d never experienced anything more glorious.

Patches pried his eyes open with a groan, hearing voices. He recognized one of the nurses while trying to make out the other familiar one. Sounded like... *Tegan*.

He groaned his way to sitting, remembering he’d texted her in the zombie hours after Lesion’s hero boost wore off the night before. There was no way he’d make that ride to her.

He listened to the agitated nurse. “Well, ma’am, he’s recovering from an accident, and we have a hurricane to prepare for, your business will have to wait,” she said, sorry not sorry.

He made his way to his feet as he heard Tegan’s voice, making her own point, sounding like she’d made it a few times already and wasn’t budging. Was she on speakerphone? “And I *told* you I *know* about the accident and that’s why I drove here.”

Drove here. She was *there*? How the hell did she find her way to his hospital?

The nurse must've read his mind as Tegan said, "Well, I didn't teleport to this exact location, I was driven by a very nice and helpful man named Jek," she said, stressing the nice and helpful at the nurse. "I got the number on the Bayou Bishops Facebook page, my lord, can I just see him so I can drop off this equipment and show him the ropes then get out of *your hair?*"

He finally found his phone and opened the hospital app, hitting the paging button. "Nurse...uh... Sarah," he remembered. "Show the lady...to the basement. Please. I'll handle it from here. Thank you."

"Yes sir," she said as Patches slid the phone in his back pocket while swaying his way to his white coat and carefully sliding it on. He mentally counted and located his injuries. Fuck, he'd need a fucking map for all of them.

He was at the bottom of the stairs when the door opened above. Thank fuck, he would never make that climb.

She gasped at seeing him. "Oh my God. You weren't kidding when you said you'd been mauled!"

He leaned against the wall, surprised at the woman heading down the steps toward him. Not the twig of a thing he'd imagined. She was bursting with curves in a pair of jeans that left nothing to the imagination. He didn't even make it to the upper half by the time he was staring into the concerned face of a Miss Texas USA, complete with a black cowgirl hat. Just what he needed. A Texas Barbie in the swamp during a hurricane.

But who the hell would've told her he was *mauled*? "How... did you find out what happened?"

"You texted me!" she cried, angling her head at his midsection. "Now I see why your nurse was so protective. You always work in only a doctor's jacket and jeans? Lordy, you're lookin' like Mr. October in that get-up. Hey, if you wanna do some modeling for my new line of clothing, I'll make it worth your while." She presented her phone, holding it before his

face. “That’s your text,” she said, like he hadn’t believed her. “It was confusing as hell, but I figured out you were in trouble. I called that number on the Facebook Page and reached a nice man named Jek who confirmed you had been attacked. By a *man*,” she added with a whisper. “Who had been attacked by *bats!*” she further hissed.

He read the text, marveling at how long it was. “I voice texted it,” he remembered, explaining why it was such a mess. “I was so high,” he recalled then. He’d taken a couple Lorazepam to sleep. “I’ll pay you,” he mumbled. “For all the trouble.”

“No trouble, sugar,” she said, leaning against the stairwell wall and crossing her arms. His gaze got stuck on the milky swell of breasts being pushed up by her arms. He closed his eyes and lowered his head as his celibacy habit took over about two seconds too late.

“You need help getting somewhere?” she suddenly asked, maybe realizing he was stuck against the wall in agony.

“I’m...headed to the back porch.”

She took hold of his arm. “Well, then, direct me.”

The command left no room for compromise, and he chose not to bother even though he could walk fine. It was everything above his waist that was demolished. “That way,” he nodded, angling his body right.

“I have the equipment. I don’t know what’s going on,” she said, her voice going quiet like she somehow knew whatever it was must be classified. Maybe Jek. “I’ll get it set up right away and we’ll get your brother fitted with the biometric tag so you can help him. I am so sorry to hear that happened. Bats are no freakin’ joke. We lost thousands from one flock or whatever they’re called. How in the world did he manage so many bat bites? I asked Jek and he said he couldn’t discuss it, but I could ask you. I’m fine if you can’t say, I’m still gonna help however I can. But shit you not, I’m *dyin’* to

know how the heck that happened. Which side you want to sit at?" she wondered when they made it to the porch.

"I can walk. I was just dizzy. I'm fine now."

"You sure?" she pressed, like she might kick his ass if he was wrong.

"Yeah."

He finally sat with his eyes closed as Miss Texas grabbed a rocking chair nearby and scooted it right next to his. Fuck, the hurricane prep. He had the rest of the day and tomorrow to make sure everything was ready.

"You need anything? A drink of water? Bottle of pain killers?"

He let go a half laugh. "I'll need something. I have too much shit to do."

She looked around. "Like what? I decided I'm not making the drive back and was gonna get a hotel. But guess what? There ain't a single dang room available for a hundred miles. Can you believe that?"

"We have room here," he mumbled. "Every Hatch has a community shelter."

"Wow, that's amazing. I learned a little about that from Jek on the way out here. I have been a lot of places Doc but never have I ever seen such a paradise as this. You know in Texas, we want to be our own country. We're all sick of the damn high up corruption, strangling the little people while pretending they do it all because they care. They don't care about *potatoes*," she assured with a snap of her head and eyes at him. "They care about control, power and money. We just want to own what we own without being manipulated by big brother, you feel what I'm saying?"

My God, she could talk. But then, everything was bigger in Texas he'd heard.

"I know, I know, I talk too much. Daddy said it's a turn off with men. Probably why I do it, just to spite him and

whatever man stupid enough to think I need one. Don't get me wrong, I'm not a feminist or anything. I like men for the most part." He got in a chuckle. "It's the pricks I don't like. How's it my fault there's so many of those? You think they see a sweet mother for their spawns when they look at me, and not just the finest ass they ever saw? That's their words, not mine. An ass is an ass, is an ass, not sure what the *damn* fuss is all about with that. But that's dick for brains and judging by this place around here, I might be a tad excited to think male pricks are outlawed in these parts."

"Your excitement wouldn't be wasted Miss Texas. But don't get too excited. The Twelve leaders of this place have a rule. No booze, no bitches and no blasphemy."

Her slow smile drew his gaze and he found himself watching it like a rare event. It kind of was. "Well, I'd wager my spurs there's more than *twelve* men in this swampy heaven."

He nodded with a "Yeah," while looking down at his coat pocket. He spotted his pack of joints and silently rejoiced, pulling them out. "But they're not all bound by that code."

"Here, give me that." She took the pack from him and pulled a joint out. "You got a light?" She went to feeling his coat pocket where he'd gotten the pack then dug out his zippo. "Oh, nice," she said, opening and putting it to her nose. He watched her take a sniff, her milk chocolate eyes rolling with her "mmmm. I *love* that smell."

She presented the joint to his mouth and he eyed her as he leaned and captured it with his lips, watching her as she flicked the lighter, face now serious. Those perfect brows softened when the fire appeared, moving it to the tip of the joint. He puffed, getting it fully lit.

"Kinda dumb for a doctor to smoke, don't you think?" she mused, taking it from him and puffing real big on it. She sputtered and choked, handing it back to him. "That's not a damn cigarette!"

“No, it’s not,” he said, unable to stop his laugh. “You’re a real trip. How about you take a break for a swamp second and enjoy the quiet morning. Then we can get to what needs doing with as little words as possible.”

She nodded, looking around. “Alright Doc,” she said lightly. “I like a straight shooter.” She tucked her chin and pushed the front of her hat up a little. “That’s a whoooole lot better than an ass-kisser.” She looked at him. “So... where are these... Twelve Swamp Warriors?”

Was she in heat? “In their Hatches, likely.”

“Ah.” She looked around then wondered, “Where’s the one for this Hatch?”

He took in a huge breath and released it.

“Alright,” she fussed lightly, “don’t need to get huffy, I’ll shut up.”

He took another hit off his joint, counting the seconds.

“Just so you know, I’m volunteering for hurricane assistance if it’s needed. I’m capable if I’m shown what to do.”

“Two seconds.”

“What’s two seconds.”

“How long you went without talking.”

It was her turn to suck in a huge breath and let it go. And to his shock, they sat in silence. And for the entire fifteen minutes, he went about figuring out what the hell he was supposed to do with her while she was there. She was an unlikely volunteer, but the swamp never judged a helping hand. So, neither would he.

Would be the first time Ethan had uneasy feelings meeting their Seer. But it felt like the entire world could easily

see the war happening in his guilty pores. His worst fears were realized when he couldn't stay aroused with Cat. At the last second, his body yanked it all away. *Not so fast, Loverboy. Where's my pain?*

But something else happened. She happened. He'd bared his evil addictions, and she took it like the angel she is. From that moment, he'd had a new war. The one that got what it wanted but this time it wasn't so much what as it was who. His addiction was bad before it was worse now. It didn't just want pain it wanted her *and* pain and it wouldn't hear of any compromise. Without trying, fantasies ensued. He knew exactly what she looked like wearing black leather. Exactly what she would do when she punished him. There was only one thing he didn't know and that was what it would *feel* like. It was now the utmost piece of critical information to his existence.

He eyed Cat hurrying down the pier, his sick hungers front and center. Her strength was becoming its own appetite and his mind already thought of ways to exploit it. She was now his defender. His warrior. His heroine wrapped in silk. Fuck, to have her punish him...there could be *no* greater pleasure.

He took her hand and helped her in the boat. He directed her to sit in the seat before him where he could reach her. "You ready for this?" he asked when she faced him.

"As I'll ever be. You nervous to see the Seer? Cause I sure am," she volunteered.

He leaned till his mouth was next to hers. Her warm breaths turned instantly erratic. Yes. There was something delicious about this effect he had on her. He kissed her softly, feeling the shape of her lips with his and her arousal erupted. He pulled back, refusing both of them as the fire continued to burn. Denying himself pleasure was the one form of pain he had control of. And giving her pleasure while his body begged to join her was another. One she loved and hated.

He studied the other anomaly to his lusts. That sweet, shy smile she wore after he kissed her. Somehow, he *loved* those with an equal ferocity as his other kinks. Like vanilla and chocolate. Could they be mixed? What would that taste like? And her innocence. That was a cherry sitting on top of it all. He was sure it was meant to crown whatever the fuck would become of them.

Cat swallowed, wondering how those stomach butterflies managed to find their way into her throat. Was all him. Heaven's sakes he was too beautiful. She wasn't sure why she was nervous about seeing The Seer but if she had to guess, she worried he'd see all the dirty things she thought. What if he saw all her ideas to help Ethan? She didn't know if they were wrong, but they seemed like they might be. Only, considering Ethan's situation, she felt like there was an exception to be had. If her husband needed something sexually, what was so wrong in providing it?

She was terrified about that answer. And she really wanted to ask Ethan again if there wasn't some...safe way to do it. Was like asking the drug addict if there was a safe way to do drugs. Of course there was. I do drugs safely all the time. Nobody dies. Until they did.

It suddenly seemed vital to talk to him about her idea. She didn't want to keep things from him, that was not the way to a trusting relationship. She eyed his profile, loving how the wind blew his hair back. He had such a strong forehead. A strong everything. "So, I was thinking," she said over the hum of the motor.

He turned and looked at her. "What were you thinking?"

Lord, his look and tone said he knew it was about sex. She moved her hands along the thin yellow dress, focusing her

thoughts into the most convincing argument.

“Oh boy,” he said when she took a bit.

She laughed then said, “Don’t shoot it down till you hear me out.”

“Right,” he muttered, moving his gaze back to the passing forests.

“As your wife, I’m a help mate. Right?” He only grinned and she hurried on. “And that is God’s divine way, not mine,” she added with innocent hands up. “For better or worse, through good times and bad, thick and thin, *and*,” she added, shooting a finger up, “through sickness and health.” He smiled at the trees, and she hurried on. “Scientifically, masochism is considered a kind of disease or sickness, and God says I’m supposed to help you through that.”

He turned and looked at her. “What do you want to do?” he demanded, seeming ready to know.

“I want to give you what you need, that’s what I want to do. I can learn. You can teach me, you said so.”

“Fuck,” he muttered, lowering his head. Soon his chest moved like he struggled to breathe, and she reached out and grabbed his arm.

“Hey,” she called, getting his tormented gaze on her. “Breathe, Ethan. It’s just a question, you can say no.”

“But I *can’t* say no!” he growled at her. “I don’t *want* to say no.”

“Then don’t,” she urged softly. “I’m stronger than you think and...” she lowered her head as her chest filled to the brim. She looked up at him, blinking past tears. “You might think it’s silly but...” She couldn’t look him in the eye for fear of him laughing and so looked blindly at the forest. “I happen to love you a lot.”

He let off the gas and boat suddenly slowed till they sat still in the water, him staring at her. “What did you say?”

She wiped her face and fought the temptation to play it off. “I said I happen to love you. A lot. And I think love can ___”

He took hold of her face and pressed his mouth so tightly to hers. He suddenly opened and began kissing her, his gasps hot as he stroked her face. “You love me Ma Petite Menou?” he asked, angling his head to devour her more.

“Yes. So much,” she swore, filling her hands with his silky hair. “Let me help you. Please,” she begged, holding his face, and kissing him back. “You know I can, you’ve seen how mean I can be.”

“Cat,” he gasped, his kiss getting rough and aggressive. “I want that so much.”

“You’ll teach me.”

“Yes. Yes, I’ll fucking teach you. I’ll teach you so good, baby.”

Her heart rejoiced and she stifled a sob as he sucked at her neck with an agonizing moan. “I’ll fight for you baby,” she promised, stroking his beautiful head. “We’ll fight together. We’ll win.”

CHAPTER NINE

Ethan eyed the Seer as he made his way with Cat toward the Basilique. She'd taken hold of his hand, and it amazed him how something so little could have so much power. They were on another level he realized. No words needed. She needed to feel him, and he needed to feel her, and then they were touching. Just like that.

With every step they took toward the man with divine eyes, his fears danced in and out of the excitement Cat put in his blood. The fear was different than before, and he knew without a doubt what changed it. Her love confession. His body filled again with that surge of adrenalin, wishing he could drag her back home that instant and begin teaching her. God, he'd already made long lists of supplies to turn her into his most feared, most lusted, most *loved* Sadist.

That word. *Love*. Her idea and his were worlds apart. Hers was pure and angelic. Selfless. To have such a miracle for himself was *something*. Having it from her was *everything*. For him, all his emotions were driven by data, controlled by analytics, and perfected by algorithms. It's the only thing he knew. And the only thing that worked for him.

"Wow, I don't remember him being so handsome," she whispered.

"Watch it," he muttered.

She gave a low laugh and his hunger picked out a sadistic glee that filled his balls with a raging pulse.

"Little Ethan," Seer said as they climbed the steps of the Basilique. "Been a marsh minute," he said, pulling his

hand from his black preacher coat and reaching toward him with it.

Ethan stopped before him, staring at the divine weapon now aimed at him. Cat squeezed his other hand, reminding him she was there. His beautiful warrior with the sun-kissed skin and silk-spun hair. He raised his gaze to the Seer's bright blue eyes and put his hand in his.

Ethan watched as his perfect mouth tugged with a hint of a smile as his eyes glazed over then slowly closed. A full minute in, Ethan's pulse quaked through his blood as something swam around hungry inside him. Something dark, something... cold and ugly.

Seer released his hand and Ethan's breath blasted from his lungs. He blinked, realizing he'd closed his own eyes. He looked at the Seer now eyeing Cat. He watched as his hand stretched out toward her.

"Je' boo-swan-deh vwah set-awnge," he said, his voice a whisp of silk.

She looked up at Ethan and he nodded at her, squeezing her hand the way she had his. If *he needed to see this angel*, then he surely would.

She looked at him and stared at his hand the way he had. What was she thinking? Was she afraid? If so, of what? With a gasp, she grabbed hold of his hand and Seer's eyes closed instantly with a pull in his brow.

"Pour-quet set awnge ahtil pur?" he pled, softly, the question stirring that dark thing Ethan felt seconds before. What did Seer mean by, '*what is this angel doing?*'

She let out a gasp and he realized she was crying.

Seer made soothing sounds, covering her hand with his other, then stroking it while mumbling in a language Ethan didn't recognize.

He suddenly moved their hands to Ethan and Seer opened his eyes, nodding. Ethan took her hand and Seer

placed both of his around their joined hands.

“The two shall *be* one flesh,” he said, staring at him. “And what God has joined together...allow *no* darkness to break it.”

He looked at Cat who still cried quietly, wiping her eyes. “There’s a false idol blocking your path. Until it’s removed, you will *not* reclaim the lost land.”

He winked at Ethan then gave a blooming smile at Cat. “Cup of coffee before we head out?”

Nitro groaned, opening his eyes. He stared at a ceiling, his heart hammering hard and fast in his chest. Where was he? What was wrong?

He moved and heard metal clank. Looking, his breaths turned labored. Chained... “Hey...” he called, the word getting cut off as he coughed, wincing from the pain in his throat. And body. He lifted his head, panic filling him at seeing blood on him. “Hey!” he yelled, again choking on the agony in his throat.

“He’s awake!”

He jerked at the voice beyond the door. “Felix,” he called. “FELIX!”

“I’m right here, I’m here baby. Let me go get Patches.”

“Fuck, what happened?” he gasped. “What is this blood?” he croaked, panting then succumbing to a violent round of coughing.

“Lesion and Patches are coming.”

“What did I fucking do? What did I fucking do!” he roared. “I need to see you.” He jerked on his restraints, biting down on a sudden rage. “Felix, what did I do, what did I

fucking do?” he begged, tears burning his eyes. “I hurt you, I fucking *know* I did, I can...*taste* you,” he strained, gasping for air as agony ripped his chest open.

“I’m going to kill him,” he swore, his saliva turning acidic and bitter. “I’m going to kill Lesion for doing this. No, no, no, don’t cry baby, fuck. Please.”

“It’s not his fault,” she sobbed at the door. “It’s *mine!*”

“No! No, it’s *not* your fucking fault.”

“He texted me the dosage,” she wailed. “I never even saw it. I was too busy...I was too busy...I don’t know what I was even doing,” she cried, her broken heart bringing a sudden biting fury that made him pull on the chains till he roared and thrashed.

“I need to see you!”

His breaths bellowed out in half growls as the sound of clanking metal outside the room reached him along with other voices. They’d had to lock him in. Chain him to the fucking bed. What had he done?

The door opened and he jerked his head up, panting, spotting his wife behind Patches and Lesion. “Felix.”

She pushed through the two and ran to him, kissing him right on his dirty mouth. “What happened?” he barely whispered, moaning at the feel of her. “What did I do? God, I’m so thirsty.”

“He needs water,” she said over her shoulder, her anger bringing pricks to his skin as she returned to kissing him with a delicate tenderness. It brought a helpless rage to be free, to touch her like he needed, like she needed.

“Felix, would you go get Nitro a water while we talk to him?” Patches asked.

She nodded, her tears falling right on his face. He leaned and kissed her before she pulled up. “I’ll be right back,” she whispered, wiping her tears off him.

He realized she wore a long sleeve, high neck sweater and knew without asking it was to hide what he'd done.

He waited for her to leave before he demanded, "Tell me what happened, don't fucking lie to me," he growled.

Patches moved next to him and his gaze dropped to the bruises covering his chest.

"Oh fuck," he whispered, his gaze shooting up. "What happened?"

"You had another episode," Lesion answered, moving next to him.

He looked at him. "I thought I was *fucking* getting better?"

"I don't know what happened yet. But we found equipment that will allow us to monitor your levels in real time. If I know your levels, I can prescribe the antidote to bring them back to normal within seconds."

"What...how?"

"I would implant a biometric device under your skin. It comes with a program that monitors whatever I input. When your levels get unstable, I'm alerted. 8-Bit will write a program that allows you to monitor yourself and administer the required dosing of the antidote, allowing you to live normally until I find a permanent solution. And I'm *very* close. I currently have every antidote to counter all your current symptoms. We just need to be able to administer them before these imbalances become dangerous or until you learn to naturally control them."

He shook his head at him. "What if I won't *want* to fix it? When this... thing takes over..." He eyed both of them, his breaths shaking. "I *don't* hate it. I *love* it," he whispered, looking again at Patches' chest. "I don't remember anything," he said. "I'm fucking...sorry," he croaked, sick at what he'd done to him. "What...did I do to her? She's wearing that sweater to hide it."

“More biting and blood drinking,” Lesion said, his tone low.

“Oh, is *that it*?” he grit, fury surging till he clenched his jaw. “How bad was it?” he had to know. “And why is she blaming herself?”

“She found the text I sent her,” Lesion said. “I tried to tell her it was my fault, I should’ve called and double-checked that she got the text and understood. I gave her the dosage over the phone, and she said she was writing it. I don’t know if she lost it or just forgot but none of that matters. If I could have lied to her and said otherwise, I would have,” Lesion assured. “The last thing I want is her blaming herself with everything else.”

“Right,” Nitro gasped at the ceiling. “Like her husband raping and mauling her in front of whoever wants to watch.”

“Here’s something else,” Lesion began, his eagerness making him want to bite his face off. “Her bites...seem to heal quickly. Unlike with bats, you create something in your saliva when you perform the mating ritual that allows for clotting *and* rapid regeneration. But with the bite you inflicted on Patches, it did not clot, it bled freely. It seems the chemical makeup in the saliva when you bite to kill and bite to mate are very different.”

“She tried to stop you,” Patches said. “No matter what she did to you—and she tried everything she could—you never hurt her.”

He closed his eyes. “She will never be able to trust me now. She’ll always wonder when I’m going to turn into an animal and start...” He shook his head. “Do what you have to. Right now,” he whispered, looking at Lesion. “How soon before I can get out of this bed, this fucking room? I need to be with her. I know that being away from her makes whatever is wrong with me a lot more wrong.”

“I’m going to put the implant in as soon as you eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” he snapped, not wanting to wait.

Lesion looked at Patches. “Then we’ll do it now.”

Patches nodded and put a hand on his shoulder. “The sooner the better, right? Kinda sick of looking at you. Plus, the hot chick from Texas who brought this equipment is stuck here for the Hurricane. She volunteered to help me, so I might need this basement to commit a little fornication.”

Nitro’s guts loosened at hearing the prospect of him with another woman. Like he’d been secretly suspecting him of making a move on his wife.

He was truly losing it.

Ethan wished he gave more of a shit about things *not* Cat related but until he understood the Seer’s words, he couldn’t function as a leader of anything. He was evilly thrilled to be done with the business of her brother and he sure didn’t need divine eyes to see the man needed a second opinion about his condition. With the advances in science, there was a high chance something existed that could help him. Her brother was taking Jason to their Hache’s hurricane shelter so they were safe from the storm. His own Hatch was secured and ready. That left him and Cat and what the Seer said.

Arriving at his home, Ethan hopped out and helped Cat out. He realized he’d never once looked forward to going to any place he called home. But as he stared at her on the dock, his body and blood vibrated with an energy he could easily call happiness. She gave him that. He took her face in his hands and kissed her softly. He asked her around gentle nibbles, “What do you think the Seer meant by what God has joined together, let no darkness break it?”

Her lips spread under his and he moaned at the feel of her fingers sliding along his scalp into his hair. “I... actually think he may have married us right then.”

He paused, pulling up. “Seriously?”

“It’s what the holy man says when two are joined in marriage.”

That energy bubbled in his veins until it made him smile. He scooped her off her feet and cradled her in his arms, her laughter making that stuff in his body leap around. “That would make this our honeymoon?”

She nodded with a secret smile then leaned up and kissed him. The boldness sparked against his masochism like a match on flint as he pulled up. “I need my eyes to walk, sadly.”

She settled for kissing his neck as he hurried along the pier, wondering. “What should we do first?”

“Maybe have coffee,” she said, sounding giggly.

“Please say you’re joking.”

“So much,” she laughed. “I think you know what I want.”

His pulse jackhammered in his chest as he maneuvered through the side gate. “I’d rather not make guesses for this one. Are you giving me a hickey?” he asked as she moaned and sucked his neck hard.

“Yes, I’m marking my territory,” she whispered, her breaths hot as she moved to another spot and sucked again, making him groan.

“That feels fucking amazing,” he confessed, at the back door now. “Where’d you learn that?”

“From you.”

“Tera, I’m home. No updates,” he called before muttering, “I never gave you one of those yet.”

“Don’t matter,” she whispered, licking along his skin. “You still taught me. You just gotta stand there being sexy, and I start learning things I never knew before.”

Everything quit being funny now that they were where he was desperate to be with her. He walked in and locked the door then carried her to his room. “

He leaned and put her on the bed, only to have her cling to his neck and pull him down with her. “Fuck, I want to shower,” he whispered around her lashing tongue.

“I’ll wash you,” she gasped, her hand on his cock.

He took hold of it and brought it to his mouth, kissing it and sucking her fingers, ready to test this entirely new dynamic unfolding. “Let’s do it.”

He pulled her up and into the bathroom, letting her undress him while watching her mouth constantly devouring everything she uncovered. “You are so perfect,” she kept saying between ravenous sucks and licks that had him winded. Once he was naked, he yanked the sleeves of her dress down in one go, diving on her naked breasts. They were so fucking tight and perfect. He smeared his open mouth all over them, growling as his touch went on a hot descent. He pulled up at feeling she covered her pussy with both hands and looked at her.

Seeing fire in her eyes and worry pressed new buttons that made him want to bite that fucking hand hiding what he wanted. “Move,” he ordered, nipping at her mouth as he slid his hand in her panties with a harsh groan. He felt the perfect shape of her, the skin reminding him of his face a day after shaving. He suddenly couldn’t wait to feel that on his mouth.

“I have to shower!” she shot out, holding his head back when he knelt before her. “Please,” she begged, her tits rising and falling with her breaths.

He stood and pulled her to the shower, putting her back against his chest, his heart drumming as he held out his hand to the soap dispenser. The air filled with steam as the automatic sensors adjusted the spray to the perfect temperature. He rubbed the soap together in his hands. “Hold my neck.”

She clamped her hands tight, and he kissed along her face, moving his palms over her perky tits first, feeling every inch of her. Her sharp moans brought each of his fingers to tease the thick tips till she pushed her ass into his cock. Realizing how hard he still was, a brutal hunger sent his hand straight to her pussy, the fire in his blood turning his touch greedy, pressing into the plump silk while he sucked her neck with the same cruel measure, marking her with *his* hickey now.

He turned her into the water, rinsing her when her arousal reached desperate. His hand turned rough over her pussy lips, and she gasped in response, lifting her leg for him. He groaned, spreading her silk folds and pressed his palm on her clit, dipping his finger inside her with each firm pass. He pulled her harder into his body, grinding her ass against his cock while his mind shot out in new directions, his cock sliding between her tight ass cheeks till he was burning.

“Fuck me,” she gasped. “Please.”

The dirty word and weakness in her beg put a vicious pulse in his cock, and every raging chemical demanded more like that. More filth, more desperate, more begging. He followed the urge and pressed her into the shower wall, the sight of it feeding something in him he knew on some level but never experienced.

“Open your legs,” he ordered at her ear while sliding his hand up and down her pussy from behind, watching her ass as she did as told. He slid his cock over that tight silk and she gave a sharp gasp of worry, spiking this new hunger with a devious lust. “You like that baby?” he whispered at her ear. “You know my cock is too big for your sweet pussy, right?” he shuddered, pressing the head at her opening.

Her moans mixed with frantic gasps and her fear hit him like a punch in his dick. He devoured it, letting it coat his mind. “Don’t be scared of the pain, baby,” he said in her ear. “Let it feel good.”

He pushed the head in, and her muscles quivered, her sharp cry hitting his veins like a drug. “Fuck...baby,” he gasped, realizing he was teaching her. He’d wanted her to understand his need for pain and pleasure but never thought of having her experience it. “You’re taking my huge cock for me?”

“Ethan,” she panted. “It’s... *too big*.”

“Fuck,” he gasped, holding her hips in a vice grip. “And you’re *too tight*.”

“Oh God,” she panted, worried. “It’s going to hurt.”

The *hurt* word wrapped in pain and fear detonated a sadistic lust that demanded he crush his masochistic lover. With a single shove of his cock, he gripped her hair and caught her first scream with a greedy, devouring kiss. She gave another with his next thrust, opening his veins to receive the ultimate high as he drove his cock to the very bottom of her over and over, her every scream a shockwave of pleasure that sucked his orgasm closer.

It was seeing her face pressed into the tile and her oval mouth pouring with moans and whimpers that brought clarity to the power growling in his chest. This was the power of the sadist. And it was its own hard core drug. He remembered what was at stake and managed around breaths, “Tell me what you want.”

“Please,” she panted, her eyes slits of fire. “I need you,” she gasped.

He looked between them and tilted her hips with his hands, bringing that frantic worry to her moans again. “You like it? You want it so fucking hard in your tight cunt?”

“Yes,” she gasped, trembling.

His fingers dug into her soft hips, getting ready.

“I want it, I need you, Ethan!”

He shoved her up the wall and sheathed his cock when she dropped back down. This time her scream snatched his

self-control and his orgasm came like a whirlwind. A lust-rage cut free in him, and he was on the other side of the looking glass, the sadistic master orchestrating pleasure and pain till he wondered how he'd never only wanted that.

“I love you, I love you,” she cried on every breath when his thrusts finally slowed.

Those words. Ethan stared at her mouth half against the tile, her breaths bursting out with whimpers. He pulled his cock out of her and held her against his body in a tight embrace. Ten seconds without the lust-haze driving him brought in the full reality of his actions. “I hurt you,” he barely said against her face, a familiar disgust slithering through his veins.

“I didn't hate it.” The soft confession rode her moans, a console full of mild surprise.

His muscles suddenly let go and he turned, putting his back against the shower. The shakes he often got after a session hit him, saying it was all real. He'd used his first time with his wife to dunk her in his filth and hold her down till he fucking got off. “You didn't even orgasm,” he croaked. “I didn't plan that, Cat. It just...you were begging me and you're...I just wanted to give you what you begged for. And now I sound like a sick predator blaming the victim when I'm the one who deliberately brought you to that edge.”

“Stop,” she begged, forcing his face to hers. “I'm not a dumb duck,” she whispered. “I knew what was going on. I know this is a battle to do something different. Do you realize what you did?”

He stared at her, clueless and now curious with her smile.

She pulled him to her mouth and gave him little kisses. “You... had...an orgasm...” she said between pecks on his lips, “*without...pain.*”

Holy shit. He stared at her. “I did.” He was instantly suspicious. Anything with his sexuality had to be treated like a

convicted felon on death row looking for escape opportunities.

“Isn’t that *amazing*?” she scolded lightly, still pecking on his lips.

He realized he was ruining her moment. And it was surely *her* moment because she took credit for this suspect anomaly. He decided to be straight with her. “I want to celebrate that, but my shit doesn’t work so nicely.”

“What do you mean?”

He stroked her disappointed face and the wet hair along it. “Know first that anything that’s fucked up about me will never be about you. Anything good, yes, all you.”

“Well... *this* is good?”

He kissed her nose and forehead then lips. “It does seem like it. But I know this thing. It’s cooperative if it means getting something it wants.” And that his addiction was okay with sadism was hardly a reason to rejoice since it was the faithful spouse of masochism. The two were equals in their own domains with one feeding off the other.

“Well...it *could* want this?”

He slid his hands along her back and covered her cute ass, loving the beautiful look of hope in her eyes. Hope for him. And them. “It could,” he said, deciding to protect it. Feed it. “If anybody can break this cycle, it’s you, ma petite menou.” But really, she was too good. The wrong kind of good. He’d take advantage. And he’d continue pushing her boundaries. Till she was letting him do things that weren’t safe or sane *or* legal. Most of all, he’d crave the delectable *absence* of her consent.

He pulled her pussy against his leg, ready to give her that orgasm she should’ve gotten. He froze when she winced in pain. “Fuck, you’re hurt,” he said, or remembered. Fucking moron.

“It’s a good kind of pain,” she whispered.

“Big G, run a lavender bath,” he called. “Set the temperature to accommodate open wounds,” he added. “Fuck.”

“Accommodating to your specifications.”

She tilted her head at him, her smile huge, confusing him. “Why are you happy?” he demanded, wanting her to be pissed at him.

“Because you’re beating yourself up for me.”

He scooped her up, cradling her in his arms and making his way to the filling tub.

“Mmmm, I love that smell.” She swung her lower legs and wrapped her arms around his neck, laying her head on his chest. “I like when you carry me. I feel like a princess.”

“You are.”

“And you’re my dark prince?”

He sat her on the edge of the tub. “I’ll get something for pain.”

“No!” she cried with a laugh. “It’s not *that* bad, lordy.”

“I’ll kiss it all better after you bathe.”

He chuckled at how her eyes widened, then filled with instant heat. “I can’t believe you’d do that.”

“Will,” he assured. “You’ve imagined it, I’m sure.” He climbed in the tub and sat, holding his hand out for her.

“You’re bathing *with* me?” She climbed in and sat between his legs, hissing. “Ouch.”

“Mmm, poor baby,” he murmured at her ear. “When I’m done licking and kissing it, you’ll feel better.”

“I...can’t wait,” she said, stroking her hands over his legs. “You’re so gorgeous,” she murmured, leaning back against him. “Did you notice I lusted after you when you first came to my house?”

He grinned, kissing her temple. “Maybe.”

“God, I looked like total *crap* that day. Feels like a month ago, right?” she gasped, amazed. “How did you bewitch me so quickly?” she wondered, bringing his chuckles.

“I have this bewitching app of course.”

She laughed, nodding. “Of course, you do. You’ll need to trash it now.”

“Already did,” he said, kissing her other temple now. She angled her head, giving him access to more and he took it, smiling. “You like my kisses?”

“So much,” she whispered, sliding her fingers in his hair. “I could let you do that all night. All over me.”

“Then I will.” He stroked his fingers over her arms then the outer swell of her breasts.

“You like em?”

He paused. “Your tits?”

“Yes,” she hesitated.

He considered how to answer that.

“Oh lord, you don’t like them.”

“I’m trying to find the right words.”

“Well...are they good words?” she wondered, mildly annoyed, making him laugh.

“So very good, ma petite menou.”

“They’re kinda little,” she said, helping him.

“They are so very... cute is not the right word.”

“Well, it’s not a terrible word either,” she said, sounding on the verge of pleased. “But they don’t sag either and I don’t hardly wear a bra.”

“Perky, yes. So... *fucking* perky.” He captured her nipples between his fingers, bringing her gasp and ass against his cock. “And lickable,” he added, gently rolling them. “Suckable. Mmm, so fucking edible.”

“I like when you cuss about it,” she said, breathless.

“I’m cussing because there are no fucking words to properly define your beautiful tits and what they do to me.”

She moaned and covered his hand with hers, then moved it down her stomach.

“Baby,” he whispered, watching. “Open those perfect fucking legs for me.”

She did, wrapping her hands around his upper legs as he stroked along her inner thighs.

“You’re so perfect.” His finger moved carefully over her clit. “I love every inch of you.”

She sucked in a breath and opened wider, pushing into his cock till his breaths turned ragged.

“It’s so good right here, baby?” He barely pet her clit.

“Yes, so good. Ethan,” she barely whispered. “I...I touched myself in the tub...that night...when you called.”

Fuck, he’d been dying to know. “Tell me everything. What you were thinking.” He moved his finger in slow circles right on the tip of her hard bud.

“You,” she gasped, digging her fingers into his legs. “Oh God, yes.”

“Fuck, that’s it, open wider. Is that what you did? While thinking of me? You opened your legs like this?”

“Yes,” she gasped, her back arching. “I thought...of you...putting your mouth on me.”

He sucked her cheek then licked as he picked up speed on her clit. “Right where my finger is? Is that where my tongue was?”

“Yes,” she cried.

“Was I sucking or licking you?”

“Oh God,” she shot out, her orgasm fucking close.

“You pumped your fucking hips like this?”

“Yes!”

“Yeah,” he shuddered wiggling his finger fast now. “You were pumping my fucking mouth, pulling my fucking hair. That’s what you’re going to do when I suck you tonight.” He kept talking dirty while she came and fuck, she came hard. “Take it all baby, don’t stop. Ah yeah, look at you, so fucking nasty for me. I can’t wait to *fuck* you again.”

Her hands were clenched in his hair when she spiraled back down.

“I fucking love watching you orgasm.” He stroked her face with one hand and everywhere else he could reach with his other, addicted to the feel of her.

“Wow,” she gasped.

The water shut off at three fourths full. “Good?”

“Sooooooo good.”

He grinned, his blood singing with that energy she always brought.

“So...how is it for you?”

“For me?”

“When you...do that thing with the...pain stuff. I want to know how it works. What do you like?”

Fuck. He wanted to redirect the conversation but already knew he would do no such thing. He would have to tell her eventually. “When I was engaging in it...At first I went to the Dungeon once a month.”

“What is this dungeon?” she wondered, curious. “You said it was here in the swamp?”

“Yes. It’s actually here, at my home.”

“The dungeon?”

“Yes. It’s virtual.”

She let out a soft sound of fascination. “Wow. Is it something I can see? Or only you can see it? I don’t know how this technology stuff works, sorry if I sound stupid.”

He stroked her face with his, closing his eyes as his dark urges clawed at him from the inside. “Not stupid angel. And yes...you can see it.”

“I can?”

His cock jerked as he realized she thought he meant let her physically *see* it.

“When can I? I just want to understand.”

Fuck, and she *should* understand. Maybe if she did, she might see why he couldn’t let her near it. Maybe he should... “I can show you what I do.”

“Really? Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“I think...you need to know.”

She nodded against his chest. “I agree. I can’t really know how to help if I don’t know what you’re up against. But no rush, whenever you’re ready.”

“Now,” he said quietly.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

She angled her head on his chest, peering up at him. “Are you sure?”

“I’ll tell you what I am, Cat. I’m desperate out of my mind to have it again. And if I do this, I’m opening that door. And even if I don’t do it, the door is open in my mind, beckoning me. It will never stop.”

“We’ll do this together. We’ll find a way, that’s all there is to it. I am not about to let this thing push you around, that’s my place.”

“Fuck, you know what that does to me? You talking about pushing me around?”

“I do know. And I’m ready to become what you need.
But...I do think I need to see what that looks like.”

CHAPTER TEN

Cat forced her mouth shut after entering through a heavy door made of black metal. She squeezed Ethan's hand, glad he'd taken it in his. "Don't need to worry about anybody breaking in here," she muttered as lights flickered on along the walls, revealing a sight that set her pulse racing. Black walls, black floor, black ceiling.

"It's uh...fully black," she said, her stomach knotting at spotting the single bed looking chair in the middle of the room. Also black. Stuff hung from the ceiling right above it and rose from the floor beneath. Not at all like a hospital horror movie.

He suddenly pulled her to him and kissed her. His tongue drove and lashed, telling her what being in there did to him. Enough to make her weak-kneed. He suddenly pulled away and walked over to the chair. He stood next to a small table and the lights dimmed and the walls all around changed into a scene. Of a dungeon. She looked up as the ceiling filled with the same cavernous décor. She looked all around in utter, crept out astonishment. The audacity to have this kind of brilliance in a swamp of all places.

Her gaze snapped back to him now removing his clothes. Was he starting? Was she supposed to stand where she was? And just watch?

He suddenly turned and reached his hand out toward her.

She made her way to him and put her hand in his. "So, I lay in this chair," he said softly, showing her. "And hook myself up to the all these wires and undergo a session."

Undergo. Like a painful medical procedure. “A session?”

“A Dungeon scene.”

She nodded, looking at the chair, not understanding.

“You have two ways of understanding this process. Either you get in the chair and let me show you. Or you put on a second headset and watch me go through a session.”

Oh God. “W-what...exactly would you do in a session?”

He eyed her, making her nervous with his intense gaze. Clearly the hard part for her to hear. “I’m bound on a stone slab face down. A sadist enters and whips me with a flogger while...my cock is imprisoned in something like a cage that tightens until orgasm.”

She swallowed. “H-how long is...the session?”

“As long as it takes to orgasm.”

“Which is...usually...”

“An hour. Sometimes less. Or more. Depending on my state of mind.”

She nodded, looking at the bed, ready to be sick at the idea of seeing him endure such a thing. “But...it’s not real.” She regarded him. “Right?”

“Right,” he said, his tone so very unconvincing.

She nodded, again looking at the bed.

“It’s okay to be scared,” he said softly.

More nods. “Good because...I’m definitely that. For you.”

“Why me?”

His genuine confusion confused her. “Because...I don’t like to see you hurting.”

“How do you know if you haven’t seen me in pain?”

Oh. Oh boy. Was he saying she might think he was hot when in agony? Highly doubtful. “And the other way is for me to...experience what you do.”

“On a...much lesser level,” he said.

“I can ask you to stop if I watch *you* do it?”

“Yes.”

She didn't like that answer. Like she could ask him, but that didn't mean he would. “And if I ask you to stop, you will?”

He lowered his head. “Yes.”

He wouldn't lie about it, she told herself the second she suspected exactly that. “I think it's better to watch you then.”

He turned and walked to a wall, and she got stuck on the way his butt moved, missing the secret hole in the wall he pulled the odd head apparatus he now carried.

She looked at it, listening as he explained what it was and that she would wear it over her head like a helmet with movie glasses.

“Oh, now,” she gasped as he raised it and set it on her head, strapping it on.

“This is your sound,” he said, pressing little things into her ears. “Make sure they're snug in the ear canal.”

“Okay,” she whispered, doing as he said, her hands and entire body shaking. “Is it me or is it cold in here?”

“Sixty degrees. It adds to the experience.”

“Ah,” she said, her jaws chattering. “Not used to that.”

He took her hands, and she gasped as his mouth covered hers softly. “You're okay. If you want me to stop, just call out to me.” He guided her to the chair. “Stand here where you can touch me. Once the scene starts, it'll seem very real. That's normal. Since you're not hooked up to the neuro-

network's algorithms, there's no stimuli other than the sight and sounds. Okay?"

"Okay," she whispered. "I'm...I'm ready."

"When I start the scene, you will see other people but remember it's not real. They're virtual. A computer generated image. But they seem very real."

She watched him through the goggles, explaining everything while hooking things to his body and head. Even his feet. Good lord.

"Activate Dungeon scene forty-three."

"Shit!" Cat whispered when another world appeared all around her.

"You see the people?"

"I-I see them," she gasped. "Men...there's men dressed in black right there," she pointed. "More than one, is there supposed to be more than one?"

"Yes," he said.

"Welcome back Ethan," a female voice said, sending Cat looking all around. "It's been a while. What will your poison be tonight?"

"Standard flog with cock cage."

"Initiating scene. Who would you like to attend you this evening?"

"Is there...a Mistress?"

Mistress? She looked at Ethan, finding him strapped face down on a large stone, just as he'd said. God, the sight of him, naked and bound, arms stretched out and wide open, legs the same.

"Of course. What is your preference?"

"None."

He's just using a woman to teach you.

Did he always use a woman in this? The idea knotted and burned her stomach.

“How are you doing Cat?” he asked, making her jump.

“I’m...I’m a little...I’m fine. Oh shit,” she gasped. “He...the man passed right through me,” she whispered, feeling dizzy.

“That’s normal, baby. They can’t see you. Try to relax.”

Relax. Freaking never. She reached out and encountered his shoulder, moving her hand along his arm. “Sorry,” she whispered, pulling away at feeling one of the things attached to him.

“You ready for a ride to Hell?”

Cat snapped her head to the foot of the stone slab where a woman in a shiny black leather dress split at the front stood. She was astonishingly real looking and beautiful, boobs barely covered by the black material.

“Yes Mistress,” Ethan answered, his winded words making Cat’s pulse triple as she lowered her gaze to a slash of material embedded between the woman’s shaven vagina lips. She wore boots. Black and shiny too, stopping above her knee.

“That’s a good boy,” she said, walking slowly around the stone bed, the heel of her boots clicking on the stone floor. She leaned her head next to his. “Just kidding,” she whispered. “I know there’s nothing good in you, Slave.”

“No Mistress,” he whispered.

Cat jumped when she raised a black looking crop with long leather strings and swatted the air next to her, making it snap.

“You hear that, Ethan?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“That’s the sound of your salvation.” She swung it, bringing the straps over his back, making Cat step back. His

strained groan preceded his hot, “Yes. Punish me.”

“You dare command me?” She swung the straps in an X formation and Cat gasped at the blood beading on his skin.

Virtual. Not real. Just pretend.

“No Mistress,” he groaned, letting go several hot gasps that gripped her womb despite her fear. “Forgive me.”

“Forgive...” She chuckled, stepping onto the stone slab. Straddling his waist, she faced his feet and dangled the leather straps between his opened legs. “There is no forgiveness here, *boy*. Only punishment.”

Cat recalled his reaction to her calling him *boy*, her stomach knotting more.

“Yes, Mistress,” he moaned. “Punish my cock, *please*.”

“Demon,” she called. “You heard him. Just a taste.”

Ethan’s body jerked on the slab, his hips pressing hard into the stone, his groans seething, getting frantic and louder. His legs and arms jerked in the restraints—she couldn’t breathe. The Mistress brought the straps down right between his legs. “Be still, Slave while the Demon gives you everything you deserve.”

Cat heard growling under the bed and leaned, her pulse jackhammering. “Oh God,” she whispered. What...what was that? Some...kind of animal, doing something to his penis with its mouth. It was *biting* him!

“I told you to be still!” The woman flew into a rage and Cat stood frozen in horror as she went on a whipping rampage, the straps flying faster than humanly possible, blood appearing on his thrashing body. “Not real, not real, not real,” she gasped right as Ethan’s roar ripped her heart right from her chest.

“STOOOOOOOOOPPP!” Cat screamed. “STOP IT! ETHAN STOP! STOP STOP STOP!”

“I’m stopped,” he gasped, removing that evil helmet from her head. “It’s over.”

She stared at him, looking for signs of what happened, a sob gushing at finding nothing. “You...you *yelled* and I thought...”

He pulled her in his arms and hugged her tight. “Shhh, it wasn’t real.”

“But you *screamed*. It was...she was hurting you for *real*. You said it wasn’t real,” she gasped.

“They’re not really doing it but everything I’m attached to is designed to make it feel real.”

She gasped, looking at him. “You could...*feel* that? What they *did*?” she strained, sick to her stomach, looking around. “I want to leave, I need air.” The final word came on a huge sob, and he hugged her again, walking her out.

Ethan watched Cat, dread growing in the pit of his stomach with her every pacing step and tear-filled mumbling. She was sick and disgusted. Horrified. Mortified.

“Talk to me, please,” Ethan quietly begged finally.

“There is...a *lot* to unpack here,” she explained on a gasp, wiping the tears that seemed to never stop.

There was only one thing he wanted to know. “Are you leaving?”

She didn’t come to an immediate halt but when she did, his muscles locked up at the perturbed look she wore. “Leaving?”

Like she’d never heard the word. “Are you leaving me now,” he clarified.

She drew back like he'd slapped her. "Leaving you? You think I'd *leave* you...because of *that*?" she strained, pointing in the direction of his Dungeon. "Is that what you think I'm made of, just...one bad experience and I'm running off and *leaving* you?"

Fuck, her anger had never felt so good aimed at him. "It's a lot for anybody to take if you're not used to it."

She suddenly faced him, her small frame moving with her breaths. "I will *never* get used to that." She paced again, her words stirring equal portions of disappointment and excitement. She pointed at the wall again. "That...is *not* okay. And *why* did you choose a *woman*? What the hell was that thing under the bed?"

"I chose a woman for an example."

She let out a huge, dry laugh. "That...*bitch*," she grit, fury twisting her face. "How *dare* you let a *woman* talk to you that way much less *do that* to you!" she yelled. "I will *never*," she growled at him, "*ever*... be okay with *any* woman, not a *real* one, not a *fake* one, not a fucking paper-doll one or *anything*," she went on, her hands spreading "*say* or *do* those *evil* things to you!" She jerked away, back to pacing and now Ethan was too, his Dungeon addictions clashing with his Cat ones, both gearing up to fight.

She suddenly gasped and came to a stop, staring at the air before her. "That's it," she marveled.

"What's it?"

She looked at him. "It's been nagging my mind since I walked out of there. What the Seer said."

"Which part?"

"About removing the false idol blocking the path or we will never reclaim the lost land."

He eyed her, shaking his head, not getting it. "There is no lost land to reclaim."

“All of that stuff in there, Ethan...it’s fake. It’s artificial. It’s not real, not *human*, you said that yourself.”

He paced now, agitation riding his skin.

“The only way for you to reclaim what’s lost is to remove that *out* of your life. *Completely*,” she said right at him.

He faced the back door, closing his eyes.

“You’ve been exchanging your *humanity* for...a pretend world that you’re not made for.”

“*I* made this world,” he said, turning to her. “I didn’t make it to replace real things, I made it because it was all I had. I had AL and Big G.”

“Yes, Ethan?” they both answered.

“Nothing, I’m talking to Cat.”

“No,” she said, to the air. “Let Big G and AL speak since they’re obviously a part of this. Are they not?”

“They are,” he said, pacing and looking at her. “They helped me build *all* of it. Because of *them*, I *survived* humanity. So *what* if I lost some of my own along the way, I’m here, aren’t I? I like codes, I like numbers, I like algorithms because they’re factual, they don’t change, they obey laws, they don’t get up and walk out of your life and never come back. They stay and they’re *always* the same, they *never change*.”

“They are products of *you*, Ethan,” she said, her compassion bringing his anger. “You created them, you made them what you needed, and I get that, I do. I’m glad you did, but it wasn’t ever supposed to be a permanent thing, you weren’t supposed to *become* that!” she pointed at the wall.

He opened the back door and went out to get air and away from her cruel fucking words. He would *not* explain himself to her. She had *no* clue. No *fucking* clue. He needed pain and if she couldn’t handle that then... He turned, finding her behind him. He pointed at the gate. “You can go,” he said.

“You can’t accept me for who I *am*, then *leave*. Fucking *leave*! I’m not changing for *anybody*.”

She slammed her hands on her hips, her eyes on fire. “Like *hell* will I leave,” she warned, her fight returning with a ferocity. “We are *solving* this, that’s what we’re doing.”

“I *want* pain and I’ll *have* pain, and there’s *nothing* you can do to stop it. You don’t like it then too *fucking* bad.”

She gasped, nodding at his challenge. “I will *tear* that place apart, do you hear me?”

He stormed up to her, his breaths blasting as he looked down at her fearless glare. “You will never touch them. They are *my* family. And I will *never* abandon them for *anybody*,” he grit at her.

“This pain bullshit has a beginning, Ethan, and I aim to find it and show you that *you don’t* need it.”

“No, I fucking *don’t* need pain, I *want* it,” he yelled, turning away from her.

“Why?” she snapped. “Tell me why you *want* or even *need* pain, Ethan. Why do you need punishing?”

He turned. “I *don’t* need punishing.”

“Damn right you don’t.”

“I *want* it. I *need* it to hurt!”

“But *why*!”

“So I don’t have to *feel* what I *can’t* fucking survive,” he roared, ready to kill. “I *couldn’t* escape, I couldn’t escape the fucking *bone crushing agony*,” he seethed. “It came *every... fucking... day and night!* I was *thirteen*,” he gasped, winded. “Alone, I was so *fucking alone!* I made an escape so I could *live* because they weren’t going to kill me,” he said around the iron jaws on his chest and heart. “I was *worth something*. They were *wrong*, I was worth *something*,” he swore between jagged breaths, sagging against the rail and sliding down to the pier.

Cat flew to him in a sob, clinging to his neck. “You’re not worthless, you’re *not!*” she cried, holding him tight. “I will never leave you, do you hear me? You are *stuck* and I am *not* sorry,” she wailed, covering his face with kisses. “I *love* you so much. I’m your *wife*. We are *one!* I will *never, ever* leave you!”

He pulled her in his arms and held on to her so fucking tight. “Please don’t leave,” he begged, fighting to breathe as he pulled her closer and buried his face in her neck. “I’ll learn, I’ll learn how to be human again,” he swore, his words breaking with the rest of him. “You’ll show me, ma menou, you’ll show me how to love. Show me how to love. ”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“So what’s the plan?” Tegan asked quietly while looking around at the empty hospital. “Is it a ghost town because of the hurricane?” she wondered, her eyes getting stuck on the very good looking swamp doctor. He’d gone from Mr. October in his doctor coat, jeans and zero shirt to Mr. Lay Me Down To Sleep in his blue jeans, biker boots and a black t-shirt. It all showcased a tight thick waist and a chest that went on and on, mother of *all*.

Naturally, he showed zero interest in her. Probably why she liked hanging out with him. Zero interest meant zero men problems. It ain’t often but there comes a time when you meet a guy you *want* to be bothered by. And Dr. Swamp Sex was exactly the kind.

“This is a checklist,” he said, handing a notebook to her. “We make sure everything is done on that.”

She took it then followed him when he suddenly went mobile, reading as she walked. “What the world is a... Boo-Boo Brigade?”

“My hurricane hustlers. Every hatch has a team of people that handles hurricane prepping for all in the hatch.”

“Now *that* is cool,” she said, hopping over a sudden log in her path. “So, we need to make sure they did their jobs, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Where we headin’ now?”

“I need to take a ride to the Main House and talk to Mah-Mah in person.”

“And that is?” she wondered, fighting to keep up.
“Damn hoss, you got some long legs.”

“She’s the mother of the Hoard so to speak.”

“Ohhhh nice.” They were on a dock now. Pretty little spot where they were. “What you need to talk to her for?”

“Ask her if she has room for one more.”

“One more? You mean me?”

“Yes ma’am.”

She glanced back then stopped when he hopped on a boat with a huge fan on the back of it. “I thought I was helping you?”

“You are,” he said, holding his hand out to her.

She eyed it for a second and took it, letting him pull her onto the boat. She fell into him, getting a good feel. All muscle. Good lord, he was one sexy swamp steer. He led her to a seat and helped her on it.

She stated the obvious, “High seats.”

“For seeing.”

He fastened her seat-belt and handed her what looked like headphones. “Put these on. You want me to stash your hat, so you don’t lose it?”

“Nobody touches my hat,” she informed. “I’ll hold on to it.” She removed it and put the headphones on. “What’s this for, music?”

“To block out the noise of the boat and to hear me speak over the intercom if I need to.”

She glanced behind her, watching him climb on the seat in back of hers, curious and a little nervous.

“Can you hear me?” he asked in the headphones.

“Yes. Can you hear me?”

“I can, so you don’t need to yell.”

“Sorry,” she muttered.

“Starting up. It’s loud. And it goes fast.”

Now she was a lot nervous. “How fast?”

“It can do one thirty on a clear road.”

“One *hundred* thirty?”

“Yep.”

“On a *road*?”

“Water road,” he said.

“*Water* road. Got you.” The noise he warned about was felt more than heard, shaking her skin, blood and bones. “Have mercy!” she cried. “What kind of boat is this?”

“An air boat. Her name is Boo-Boo.”

“Oh, holy night,” she cried when he finally maneuvered them to a water road and hit the gas.

His deep chuckle filled the headset, rattling her as much as that engine on their ass. “Are we gonna survive this?” she yelled.

“If I’m not blinded by your hair.”

She glanced back as he dodged her whipping mane. She fought to gather it at the front then gasped, “My hat!”

“Fuck,” he muttered in her ear.

“I’m sorry, I was trying to get my hair out your face!”

“I should’ve stored it,” he said, turning the boat around so fast she squealed in terror.

“There,” she pointed, taking off the headset and undoing her seat belt as he slowed near the cherished keepsake. She lay on the edge of the boat, reaching. “Five more feet,” she called. “Three more. No!” she yelled as it slipped under the water. She lunged for it and went in headfirst. By the time she came up sputtering, Dr. Swamp had hands on her, yanking her back onto the boat.

“My hat!” she cried, glancing back. “That’s my mommas.”

“Really,” he muttered, removing his t-shirt and jumping in. She watched as he went on a rescue mission, diving under several times before coming up with it in his hand and swimming back. He set it on the boat, and she picked it up, offering her hand only to have him ignore it and pull himself up. He stood before her, and she eyed his massive chest and rippling abs. “Those... bruises should be looked at,” she muttered, shaking her wet hat. “Thank you. It’s my lucky hat.”

“Lucky?” He used his shirt to dry himself off and lifted a lid at the side of the boat, tossing it in. He reached his hand toward her, and she wondered what he wanted.

“You’re not holding it,” he assured.

Oh. The hat. She handed it to him, and he put it with his shirt and shut it then opened another one. He tossed her a brown towel and she caught it. “Thank you,” she said, drying her hair then upper half. She gasped to herself at seeing her white top was practically clear as glass! Bra showing for the world to see. She wrapped the towel around her chest and tucked it, then climbed back onto the highchair, feeling like a wet clown at a rodeo. She put the headphones back on.

“Seat belt,” he blasted in her ear, scaring the *shit* out of her.

“Can you warn me?” she cried, reaching for the damn thing and clicking it in.

“Tighten it. I’m not taking another dive.”

“Very funny,” she muttered, her pulse hammering. “I can swim just fine.”

“Good to know, Texas Tegan.”

She glared at him over her shoulder. “Anytime Dr. Dirty Waters.”

There went that chuckle again, rolling all over her like thunder in a coming storm.

Dear Jesus, *bring the rains.*

Cat looked all around for Ethan, worry gnawing in her gut. Where the heck was he? He said he was right behind her. The Eveque and his wife invited them to the Main House because Mah-Mah was throwing a Hurricane Party and The Twelve and blood family would be going. And whoever else in that Hatch needing shelter.

She just needed Ethan to hurry so she could tell him she was so wrong about what she'd said regarding his AI family. He'd all but panicked when she mentioned destroying that dungeon. At that time, she hadn't realized it meant he'd be destroying the only family he'd had all these years. Poor sweetheart. Of course, they would find a way to cut out the evil without killing his AI angels. If he thought he had to do something so terrible, he'd be tortured right now. Which was why she needed to tell him.

She tried his phone one more time, getting the voice mail again. She opened the text box, hoping he saw it. *Hey, wanted to tell you I was so very wrong to say you needed to destroy your AI family, of course we're not doing that. We'll find another way to remove the bad things without hurting the good. I love you so much. Please hurry.*

“Heyyyy!”

Cat turned, seeing a beautiful woman in overalls headed up the Basilique steps. “I’m Beth, Sahvrin’s wife.”

She sucked in a breath. “The Belle Eveque? Oh my goodness, I’ve heard so much,” Cat said, smiling at how pretty she was.

“I’ve been excited to meet you,” she said, eyeing her with a huge, knowing grin before leaning in and whispering, “How’s married life going?”

She realized she might be the first woman she actually wanted to talk to about that. “Like a dream.”

“So it’s true? You and Ethan are...more than just an arrangement of algorithms and numbers?”

Cat had to laugh real good at that. “I’m happy to finally tell somebody that I’m the happiest woman on my side of the world.”

She brought her hands together in a clap then pressed them against her chest, beaming with joy for her. “I’m so happy. Bishop has been so worried about his T-8-Bit.”

“Why?” Cat wondered, trying not to be alarmed.

“Mostly the stuff about his past,” she said with regret before smiling. “But that mess is on its way out the door, thanks to you.”

They weren’t out the woods yet, but she nodded, again looking around. “He was supposed to be here by now. And I can’t reach him.”

“Bishop said he was running a little late, he *just* talked to him.”

“He did? Did he say why?”

She smiled then gave a funny look. “Bishop said you must’ve done quite a work in him. That he’d never heard him so poetic.”

“Poetic?” She didn’t recall him ever being poetic.

She wagged a hand. “Something about removing something to reclaim land.”

Panic punched Cat in the stomach. “Something about a false idol?”

“Yes!” she said, then drawing her brows together.
“What’s wrong?”

She pulled out her phone, her heart beating her chest to death as she dialed Ethan again.

“Is everything okay?”

“I need to get in touch with him,” Cat said, her panic sending her in erratic circles.

“Is Ethan okay?”

“NO!” she gasped, tears filling her eyes. “No, he’s... he’s going to remove the only family he’s ever had because I told him he needed to, but I was wrong, he doesn’t, he shouldn’t! Please, help me, I need to stop him. I need to go to him!”

“Okay, okay, we’ll find somebody to take you.” Belle Eveque looked around, pulling her down the Basilique steps. She put her fingers in her mouth and let out a whistle.
“Lucas!” she yelled, waving.

They hurried toward the man now jogging.

“Yes ma’am?” he asked, out of breath.

“Is there a way for you to grab a swamp dragon and run her to 8-Bits?”

He eyed Cat. “The Hack House?”

“No, his real house,” Cat hurried.

“Uhhh, not real sure how to get there.”

“Dammit. Bishop!” Beth yelled, waving and pulling Cat with her.

When they reached him, he demanded, “What’s wrong?”

“She needs to get to Ethan *right* away, it’s an emergency,” Beth whispered loudly.

“I told him he needed to get rid of the AI part of his life,” Cat gasped, covering her mouth.

Bishop's gaze snapped to her. "AL and Big G?"

She nodded, tears streaming. "We had a huge fight last night and I'd said that before I understood," she cried, grabbing Beth's hands and pleading. "I didn't realize Big G and AL are part of what I told him to get *rid* of!"

She'd only seen Bishop up close a few times but the panic on his face brought hers. He pulled his phone out, swearing in French then turning. Pacing. "Come on, mon frier, pick up."

Seconds more and he shook his head and shoved his phone in his pocket. "Let's go," he ordered Beth and Cat.

Special shout out to my Patreon members (BANEIACS) for helping me create! Below are the list of Patreon members followed by the winners to the games played in the Patreon Baneiacs Group on Facebook for story creation!

Anybody interested in joining that, you can sign up [here](#)

ALSO—IF YOU WANT A BAYOU BISHOP CALENDAR, FILL OUT [THIS FORM](#)

IN NO SPECIAL ORDER:

Ayn Kenyon

Coxraven

Dastardly Crimes

Deb Morton

Dorit Caltagerone

Ginger Marie

Guin Reese

Jacqueline George

Jennifer

Kathryn Norton

Lizzy Smith

Marilee Boerger

Nancy Talbot Heath

Patricia Howard

Rebel Devlin

Renee

Sara

Vanessa

Penny Box

Cynthia D Simons

Cheryl Reels

Diann Daniel

Linda Lamsus

A'Ryen

Emma dulin

Enrica Norling

Melanie McDonnell

Michelle Mendes

Sally Sutherland

Sheri Lemay

Gwynn Fuqua

Heidi

Conny

Kimberly Roux

Evelyn Wright

Conny Aiello

Elizabeth Vaughan

Cheryl jackson

Stacey Bates

Candace Knight
Lori Cimino
Anna ORoark Mann

Bayou Bishop Book Game Winners from Patreon Baneiac Group

**A swampy term for the person who is in charge of
overseeing the weather for the entire Hoard.**

Went with **Sky Seer**

Sky inspired by Sara Gonzalas and Seer inspired by Michelle
Boone Henry

#8-BITGAME

**Show me the interior of Ethan's bedroom. Remember, he's
a techie:**

-Winner: Stacey Givens Bates

#8-BITGAME

I need a name for an old Cajun man in Patches' hospital.

Pacey LeBlanc

By Stacey Givens Bates

#8-BITGAME

**Name the lady that works at Patches' hospital as the cook.
Name a cajun dish she's good at cooking**

Justine (Borque)— Justine’s crab cakes, Cajun style...

By Evelyn Leonard Wright

#8-BITGAME

I need an ominous bad-ass name for a powerful elite coven of 13 members.

Treize Damne’s (Thirteen Damned)

Inspired by Margie Ann who was damn terrible at these damn names

#8-BITGAME

Need a name for one of the Swamp Stops that specializes in women’s clothing.

Jolie Dentelle (Pretty Lace)

By: Michelle Boone Henry

#8-BITGAME

Every morning at 6:00 A.M. Ethan spends one hour performing what type of exercise?

Boxing. Keeps the muscle big and his body lean. Has a virtual trainer and a heavy bag in one of his rooms.

By Laura Marchetto!

#8-BITGAME

**8-BIT HAS A SWAMP DRAGON. WHAT HE NAME IT?
HE OR SHE?**

G-G

(Lucian Bane lol)

#8-BITGAME

GUESS WHAT WE DON'T HAVE?

PATCHES' REAL NAME

Decided to do this for next book which is Patches book!